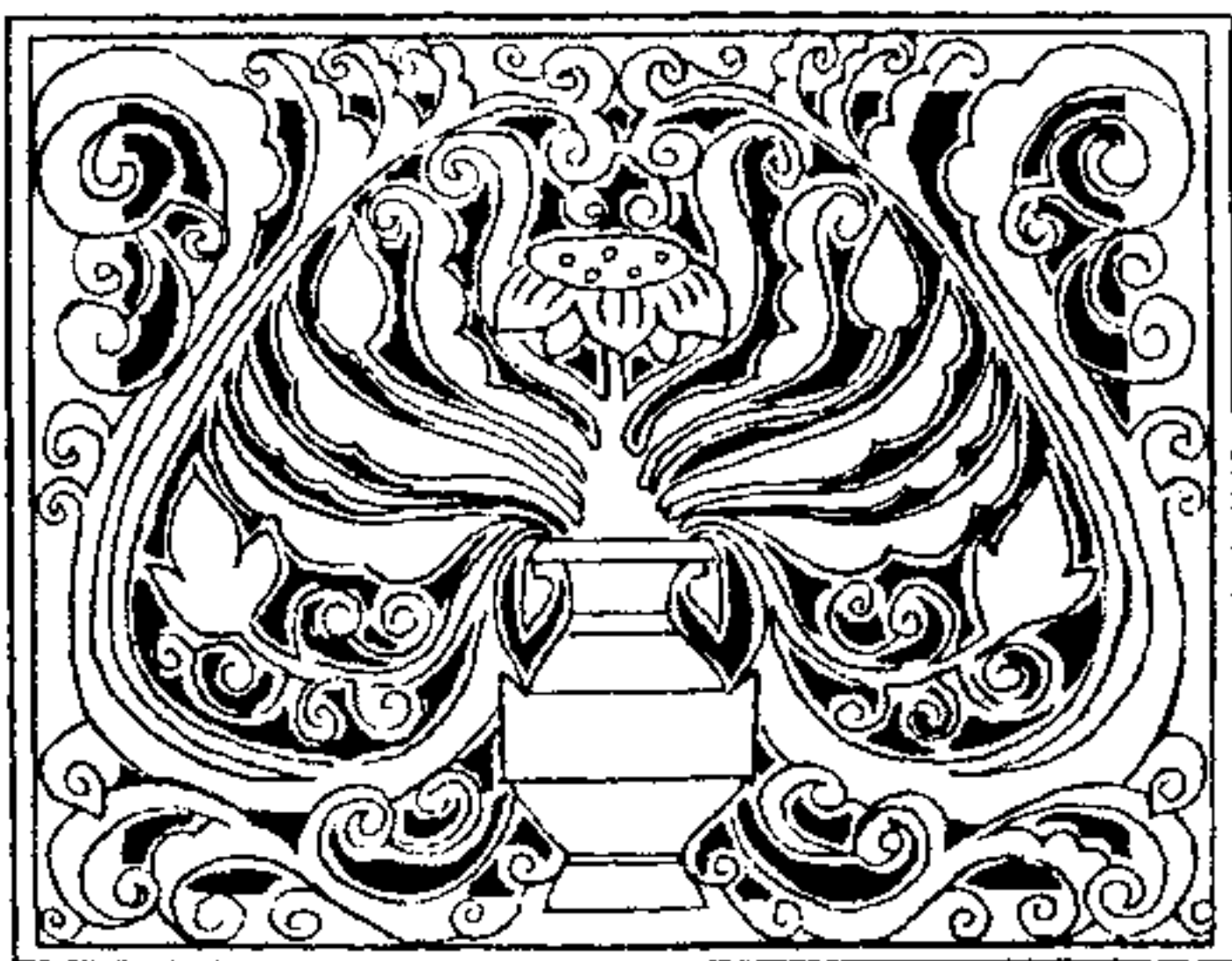




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उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

ARISE! AWAKE! AND STOP NOT TILL THE GOAL IS REACHED

Vol. 104

DECEMBER 1999

No. 12

VEDIC PRAYERS

परायतीनामन्वेति पाथ
आयतीनां प्रथमा शश्वतीनाम्।
व्युच्छन्तीं जीवमुदीरयन्त्युषा
मृतं कं चन बोधयन्ती॥

—Rg Veda, 1.113.8

शश्वत्पुरोषा व्युवास देव्यथो
अद्येदं व्यावो मघोनी।
अथो व्युच्छादुत्तरां अनु
द्यूनजरामृता चरति स्वधाभिः॥

—Rg Veda, 1.113.13

उदीर्ध्वं जीवो असुर्न आगादप
प्रागात्तम आ ज्योतिरेति।
आरैकपन्थां यातवे सूर्यायागन्म
यत्र प्रतिरन्त आयुः॥

—Rg Veda, 1.113.16

माता देवानामदितेरनीकं
यज्ञस्य केतुर्बृहती वि भाहि।
प्रशस्तिकृद्ब्रह्मणो नो व्युच्छा
नो जने जनय विश्ववारे॥

—Rg Veda, 1.113.19

The paths across the sky which the Uṣās (enlighteners) of old have traversed is the same which Uṣā follows now. And an infinite number of Uṣās will follow the same path in future. So the immortal Uṣā awakens living beings from sleep and suffuses them with enlightenment; thus beings, though appearing dead, become alive and active.

The enlightener (*devī*), Uṣā, would rise daily before. This giver of wealth is destroying darkness and bestowing all that is good now. In future also, she will continue to confer enlightenment on beings. Thus the compassionate Uṣā, who enlivens life at all times—past, present, and future—is eternal and immortal. She brings glory with her own power.

O human beings, arise! The very life that makes our bodies alive and active has arrived! The darkness is gone; brilliant effulgence has come! Uṣā is leading the way, showing the sun the path to earth! Come on, let us be there where there is plenty.

O Uṣā! You are the mother of gods (as all beings awaken and work and make sounds after your advent) and a rival of Aditi. You initiate all activities (ie, sacrifices). You bring light unto us. Being pleased with our prayers, bring Brahman to us. O universally revered one! Make us superior people.

Sita and Sarada

EDITORIAL

When we read about Sita in the *Ramayana* and about Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, it appears that the lives of Sita and Sarada were poles apart. The reason is, one was an empress while the other, a poor rustic lady. However, there are several parallels and we have tried to study a few of them here.

Birth and Childhood

The birth of both Sita and Sarada is shrouded in supernatural mystery. King Janaka was ceremoniously ploughing the land as part of a great sacrifice, when he saw the divine child, Sita, in a furrow. Since she was found in a furrow, *sītā* in Sanskrit, her name became Sita. Once, Shyamasundari, the mother of Sarada, had gone to her father's house at Sihore. One day, as she sat under a bel tree, all of a sudden her eyes blurred and her mind attained a peculiar attitude. During such a state she heard a jingling sound, and a tiny girl of extraordinary beauty, bedecked with jewels, jumped from the bel tree and embraced Shyamasundari's neck from behind. The girl said in a melodious voice that she would come to her house. Shyamasundari felt something entering her womb and fell down unconscious. She was taken home in that state. Shyamasundari's husband, Ramachandra Mukherjee, had gone to Calcutta then. He had a dream in which a little girl of golden complexion said in a sweet voice, 'Here am I come to you.'¹ These were the incidents behind Sarada's birth.

Both Sita and Sarada were the eldest daughters of their parents. Sita had three sisters while Sarada had five brothers and a sister; but the latter passed away young. Both

were married at a tender age. Since childhood, both Sita and Sarada displayed their uniqueness. There are many *Ramayanas* by several great sages, and each one has something special to offer to humanity. In one of them, there is a story that one time, while at play, Sita saw that the ball she was playing with rolled underneath the stand on which the famous Shiva bow had been kept. It is well known that none but Rama could finally lift this bow. When little Sita saw that the ball was under the bow-stand, she pushed it aside and recovered the ball, to the astonishment of on-lookers. Kamban's *Ramayana* has one other interesting episode about Sita to narrate: that she even used the Shiva bow to pluck flowers! Mother Sarada next. When Sarada worked in the fields so as to help her poor mother, a girl of her age would mysteriously come to her aid, and talk and joke with her. If any other person came near them, she would disappear. Whenever Sarada went to bathe in the river, she saw eight celestial girls going with her as entourage—four in front and four following her. 'Once during the worship of the goddess Jagaddhatri, Sri Ramhriday Ghoshal of Haldepukur was present. Finding Mother [ie, Sarada] lost in meditation before the deity, he kept his eyes fixed on her for a long time; but as he could not make out as to who was the deity and who the Mother, he left the place in fear.'²

Both Sita and Sarada recognized their husbands at their very first meeting. The *Ram-charitmanas* describes in detail how Rama went round the garden with Lakshmana the day before he was to lift the Shiva bow. Sita instantly recognized her spouse in Rama and told her maids about it. She also prayed to

1. Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1969), p. 17. [Hereafter *Holy Mother*.]

2. *Holy Mother*, p. 21.

Mother Gauri in a nearby temple so that Rama would have the strength to lift the bow. Sarada had been to her maternal uncle's house in Sihore with her parents to participate in the annual fair. She was a tiny girl of three then. A lady, on whose lap Sarada sat, asked her in merriment, 'Whom among the great number of people, assembled here, would you like to marry?' Sri Ramakrishna had also attended the fair. He was sitting not far away. Sarada unhesitatingly pointed her finger towards Ramakrishna.³

Sita and Sarada were both married at a very tender age. It was their grooms who came for their brides, either personally or with the help of messengers. While Rama himself came in order to lift the bow, and having succeeded in it, married Sita, Ramakrishna told his people in *bhāva samādhi* that the bride had been 'marked with a straw' and kept reserved in Jayarambati. Soon after marriage, there was some confusion in both cases, and it was the anger of two brahmins which was responsible for it: Parashurama and Sarada's uncle showed anger for different reasons. While Rama laughed away Parashurama's anger, Ramakrishna too laughed away Sarada's uncle's anger.

Jewellery's Vital Role

The link between being carried away and ornaments can be observed in both lives. In order to help their husbands, both had to forgo their ornaments. Rama was exiled to the forest the very day he was to be coronated. Sita was eager to go with her husband. Valmiki's *Ramayana* says that she was made to have a number of ornaments on her person in spite of her giving up royal robes for mendicant's clothes, which she thought was suited for forest life. Later on, sage Atri's wife Anasuya gave Sita some of her jewellery. Sita used some of these ornaments as devices to draw attention and seek help while being carried away by Ravana: she threw several ornaments where a group of Vanaras sat con-

versing. It was these ornaments that told Rama about Sita's whereabouts when he came in search of her. Later still, she gave an important ornament, the *cūdāmaṇi*, to Hanuman when he came to Lanka in search of her. Rama too had sent his ring through Hanuman as proof of the latter's authenticity as a messenger. After their victorious return to Ayodhya and subsequent coronation, it is said that Sita presented her necklace to Hanuman. Hanuman, so the story goes, started chewing the diamonds in it and spitting them away. When Mother Sita herself was there and he was serving her, what else could Hanuman need?

We referred to Sarada's uncle's anger. Soon after marriage, the ornaments that poor Chandramani (Sri Ramakrishna's mother) had borrowed from the Lahas for her daughter-in-law had to be returned. While she was asleep, Ramakrishna slowly removed the ornaments from his child-wife's person and returned them to the Lahas. Waking up in the morning, Sarada saw that all her ornaments were gone and was sad. Her mother-in-law consoled her, saying that in time Sarada's husband would provide her with many such ornaments. But her uncle came to know of this and angrily carried Sarada away to Jayarambati. Later, with all his otherworldliness, Ramakrishna managed to arrange for at least some ornaments for Mother. He told his nephew Hriday to have a pair of gold armlets made for her. When Ramakrishna had the vision of Mother Sita, he had noticed that her bracelets had diamonds cut on their surface; hence he had similar bracelets made for Mother Sarada also. He had humorously remarked, 'That's my relationship with her.'⁴ He also gave her his talisman which Mother had on initially, but removed it upon Ramakrishna's telling her in a vision to be careful not to lose it. In later life, there are some instances when Mother Sarada gave ornaments to her relatives. While in Rameswaram,

3. *Holy Mother*, p. 25.

4. *Holy Mother*, pp. 114-5.

when the Raja of Ramnad said that Mother could see all the temple jewellery and select whatever she wanted for herself, Mother Sarada did not show any interest and said, 'What can I need?' However, she felt that people there might be offended, and so added, 'Well, if Radhu has any need of anything, she will take it.' Though she said this, she was a little apprehensive lest Radhu should become greedy. Radhu, however, said, 'What is there worth taking from all this stuff? I don't want any of these.' She wanted only a pencil. With Mother Sarada by her side, what else could Radhu need?

From Wife to World Saviour

Sita was the beloved of the people of Mithila where she was born, and was the pride of Ayodhya, her husband's kingdom. Other than that, she was the devoted wife of Rama; that was all. Her role as the saviour of the world began with her abduction. Sita saw the magic deer—golden in hue—and wanted it. Rama went after it, and the wicked deer took him very far. When he ultimately shot an arrow at it, the demon Maricha, who had disguised himself as the deer, shouted, 'O Sita! O Lakshmana!' several times, and died. Hearing this, the terrible mistake that Sita made was to think that her Rama's life was in danger. In fact, she almost concluded that Rama was gone. Valmiki presents the long and harsh tirade of Sita against Lakshmana. Lakshmana tried to convince Sita calmly, saying that Rama could never be harmed by anyone; but she accused Lakshmana of evil intentions because she thought Rama had been killed. Unable to tolerate her words any longer, Lakshmana left her alone in search of Rama. Seizing the opportunity, Ravana treacherously abducted Sita. The moment Ravana carried her away, gods and sages understood that the days of evil were numbered. Sita came onto the centre-stage of the momentous drama of life. Her abduction was responsible for the destruction of evil. Since then, gods, demons, human beings, monkeys, birds, vegetation, waters—all were con-

cerned with Sita; nature reverberated with the name of Sita. And Sita herself became *rāma-gata-prāṇā*, one whose mind was totally immersed in Rama. She had only one thought—of Rama—since then, sitting alone in the Ashoka grove, surrounded by demons.

Mother Sarada was a devoted wife, serving her husband with utmost care and concern. Sri Ramakrishna had worshipped her as *ṣoḍaśī*. When Ramakrishna was terminally ill at Cossipore, Mother Sarada came to serve him there. Always given to extreme shyness and modesty, she endured every inconvenience for her husband's sake. She even fell down and injured her ankle once. Nevertheless, her service continued. When Sri Ramakrishna left his body, Sarada thought that everything had come to an end. Sri Ramakrishna himself repeatedly assured her, 'Why do you weep so much? Here am I. Where indeed could I have gone? It's just like walking from this room to that.'⁵ Until then hidden from public gaze, Sarada set foot on the world stage after Sri Ramakrishna's passing: She became a world teacher. Since then, she had only one thought—of Sri Ramakrishna—living amidst a family full of indisciplined people. She was indeed *rāmakṛṣṇa-gata-prāṇā*, one whose mind was completely immersed in Ramakrishna.

Their Power of Endurance

Both Sita and Sarada had to spend roughly thirteen long years enduring tremendous hardship—Sita in the forest hermitage, Sarada in the Nahabat at Dakshineswar. While the hermitage was certainly a small one for the palace-bred Sita, the Nahabat in which Holy Mother lived was not quite worth human habitation. Sita and Sarada, both covered a lot of land on foot during their lifetime. While Sita walked with Rama in jungles, Sarada had to walk miles at a stretch to meet her husband. Both Sita and Sarada transformed some not-so-famous people and called them their own. Sita had a sister in

5. *Holy Mother*, p. 141.

Trijata, the demon, who was supposed to guard her in the Ashoka grove in Lanka. There was probably nothing which Trijata did not do to console Sita. She was at great pains to keep Sita happy in spite of insane provocations of demons. Now about Sarada. Once, when Sarada went with her companions to Dakshineswar to meet her husband, she was left behind in the wilderness. She met a dacoit couple there, who acted in loco parentis. These virtual parents became so concerned about Sarada's welfare that they bought eatables for her, fed her, sang for her, and showed her the way out of the fields. They also kept contact with her later on, looking upon her as their own daughter.

We go back to the magic deer incident again. The moment Rama noticed his hermitage empty, he understood that Sita had been abducted. He became like one mad. His one thought since then was of Sita. He wept bitterly for her, and endured superhuman hazards to save her from Ravana's clutches. Ramakrishna's love for Mother Sarada was something singular. He became her teacher and spiritual master, instructing her in almost everything. He showed utmost concern for her welfare. How wonderful was the immaculate regard each one had for the other! A close companion of Mother says, 'These two beings, residing only at a distance of about fifty yards would not meet each other for long stretches of time, but in spite of it, there was much warmth between them.' Once when Mother Sarada had a headache, Ramakrishna became so anxious that he asked his nephew Ramlal repeatedly, 'O Ramlal, why has she got a headache?' Ramakrishna would take much trouble to see that Mother Sarada felt comfortable in her Nahabat.

Both Sita and Sarada never enjoyed life in their husbands' houses for long periods: both had to go to different places. Words fail to convey the suffering which Sita and Sarada underwent. For Sita, that one year at Lanka was hell. Constantly under the surveillance of horrendous demons, who could torture her

and were even discussing eating her up any moment, Sita lived in extreme anxiety and fear. Though Sarada's case was somewhat different, her little nest, Nahabat, was so small that she could hardly live there comfortably. Soon after Ramakrishna's passing, when she returned to Kamarpukur, she had to face extreme poverty. She herself had to till the land next to her house. 'Trailokya used to give me seven rupees. After the Master's death, Dinu, the cashier, and all others conspired to stop that money. My relatives, too, who were there, treated me as an ordinary mortal and joined with them,' reminisced Mother in later life.⁶ The relatives of Mother Sarada were examples of piety indeed. All her biographers describe her household very fantastically: she was surrounded by eccentric ladies who cursed her and even beat her once or twice for nothing, and her ambitious brothers always wanted nothing but money.

The Ordeal of Rejection

We mentioned Rama's and Ramakrishna's love and concern for their wives. There was the other side also. Rama fought valiantly and killed Ravana. Sita was free at last. The personification of suffering hoped that her suffering might have ended when she was about to be united with Rama. But when the shy Sita stood before her spouse whom she had meditated upon for so long, Rama, who cried 'Sita, Sita,' until then, became a stern judge and wanted to test Sita. As she was in the enemy's prison for so long, Rama doubted her purity. Sita was stunned, and pained, too, but was ready for the fire ordeal. She entered the flames but fire could not touch her holy person. The fire-god himself declared Mother Sita immaculate. Rama rejected Sita for a second time years later for the same reason. A citizen's comments led to Sita's banishment. Poor Mother Sita was in the family way. The innocent Sita thought she was going to seek the blessings of sages, but Lakshmana revealed everything in the forest

6. *Holy Mother*, p. 148.

and left her there, all by herself.

For a different reason, Mother Sarada too underwent the fire ordeal, and after days of *pañcatapa*, she came out successful. She also had to experience rejection. It was during her fourth visit to Dakshineswar from Jayarambati that Mother Sarada had to suffer humiliation. After a long and tiring walk of two days, when Sarada entered the precincts of Dakshineswar temple with her mother, Hriday behaved very rudely and told them to go away, in front of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna never uttered a word for fear of Hriday. The party had to return that very hour, all the way back to Jayarambati. Imagine the village situation of those days. If something happened to someone, the entire village would come to know of it and would discuss him or her for days. For a second time, when she had begun her journey on an inauspicious day, Sri Ramakrishna told Sarada to return to her native and come on an auspicious day. Fortunately this time, she was allowed to rest for one night before returning.

Burning the Empire

Hanuman had come in search of Sita to Lanka. He found her in the Ashoka grove, weeping and immersed in the thoughts of Rama. Having consoled her that Rama would soon be there to kill the demons and rescue her, Hanuman set forth a wave of devastation in Lanka. He set fire to Lanka before leaving. The poet has beautifully stated this:

*Ullāṅghya sindhoḥ salilam salilam
yāḥ śoka-vahniṁ janakātmajāyāḥ;
Ādāya tenaiva dadāha laṅkāṁ
namāmi tam prāñjalir-āñjaneyam.*

Hanuman used the fire of the sorrow of Sita to burn Lanka. The Lanka of demons had, of course, to wait a little more before getting destroyed, and to see the inauguration of a new empire of pious souls. So far as Mother Sarada was concerned, both the conquered and the conquerors were her children. But whenever she heard about the atrocities of the imperial rule, she would sigh. An article in

Bengali titled 'Bharater Swadhinata Sangram: Srimayer Drishtibhangi (India's Freedom Struggle: Mother's Viewpoint)'⁷ gives a detailed account of Mother's ideas about freedom. When she heard that two pious women, who were expectant mothers, were arrested and force-walked to the police station, Mother could not control herself any longer. She cried, 'The rule which tortures women will end soon.' So, it was perhaps the fire of her sighs at the difficulties of people that Swamiji used to set fire to the alien rule. It was with her blessings that he went to the West, won all hearts and inspired numerous people. Was it not his words that inspired so many freedom fighters to fight for India's freedom, which consequently made India free?

The Two Sons

When Hanuman was about to cross the ocean for the first time, he prayed to Rama and Sita for success. While returning with glad tidings about Sita, he sought her blessings and then crossed the ocean triumphantly. It is well known how Swami Vivekananda decided to go to the West, how preparations were made, how he prayed to Sri Ramakrishna for guidance, etc. However, before departure, Swamiji 'wrote to Mother to bless me. Her blessing came, and at one bound I cleared the ocean.'⁸

The Vanaras did not know much about Sita, other than her being Rama's wife kidnapped by Ravana. Hanuman crossed the ocean and met her, returned to where his battalion waited, and told the assembled Vanaras about the greatness of Sita. In the 'Sundara Kanda' of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, there is a wonderful speech by Hanuman about Sita. He says, 'O Vanaras, Janaki's character is like that of the worshipful Arundhati.

7. Cf. *Satarupe Sarada*, ed. Swami Lokeshwarananda (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1985), p. 469.

8. Swami Vivekananda, *Letters* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1981), p. 182.

By her spiritual and yogic powers, she can protect the world and can also reduce it to ashes. What Janaki can do when angry by the slight motion of her finger, even fire cannot do that.⁹

In almost a similar tone, Swamiji told his brother disciples about the glory of Mother Sarada. 'You have not understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you.... To me Mother's grace is a hundred thousand times more valuable than Father's. Mother's grace, Mother's blessings are all paramount to me.... If but Mother orders, Her demons can work anything.... Of Ramakrishna, you may aver, my brother, that he was an Incarnation or whatever else you may like but fie on him who has no devotion for the Mother.'¹⁰

Compassion Beyond Measure

Sita's compassion cannot be measured, says the *Ramayana*. In spite of all the tortures that the demons meted out, she never had a word against anyone of them. Rather, they were all saved on account of their proximity to her. Later on, when all was well and Rama ruled over Ayodhya, Sita prayed fervently that in this world there should be no difficulty at all. Mother Sarada suffered a lot towards the end of her earthly sojourn; the reason given by her biographers is her having accepted people's sins on herself. Day after day, year after year, hundreds of suffering people came to her, and she gave them shelter in every way by bringing peace to their hearts. When her monastic children went about without food, she prayed, 'O Lord... My prayer is that those who leave the world in your name may never be in want of bare subsistence.'¹¹

Resorting to Biographers

We said that Rama banished Sita to the forest upon hearing some comments of a careless citizen. Upon his brother's orders, the tearful Lakshmana left Sita in the forest and

went away. Having no other shelter, Sita went to Sage Valmiki's hermitage. Valmiki looked after Sita with great devotion, having arranged for a hermitage for her in the not-so-distant women's quarters. This very Valmiki composed the *Ramayana*, which became immortal. Similarly, when no one was there to look after her, Mother Sarada went to her dear son Saradananda. He built houses for her in both Jayarambati and Calcutta, and took great care of her till the end. Saradananda is the author of Ramakrishna's authentic life, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*.

Sita and Sarada are perfect ideals for humanity to emulate. Sita is the greatest example of endurance, purity and all-suffering nature. She endured everything silently. The ultimate test came when Rama could not remain satisfied without testing her again, and Mother Earth opened her arms and took away her dearest daughter in front of all. Mother Sarada is the best model of womanhood and motherhood for posterity, say great spiritual luminaries and accomplished scholars. Her love, compassion, devotion, purity, all-suffering nature have no parallel anywhere, and are ideals for everyone to follow. Anyone who reads her glorious life will be transported into a new dimension. And that dimension is spiritual. Towards the end of her life, too, she had to undergo inordinate suffering.

Truth is One

In Rameswaram, Rama and Sita had worshipped a Shiva linga. When Holy Mother visited Rameswaram, she saw the uncovered emblem and muttered accidentally, 'It is just as I had left it.' When her attendants wanted to know what she said, she evaded them; but upon repeated entreaties, she repeated what she had said, 'He is just as I had left him, my son.'¹² □

9. *Śīlamāsādyā sītāyāḥ mama ca pravaṇam manah;*
Tapasā dhiṛayet lokān kruddho vā nirdahedapi.
—*Ramayana*, 'Sundara Kanda', 59.2-3.

10. Swami Vivekananda, *Letters*, pp. 181-2.

11. Quoted from Swami Gambhirananda, *History of Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), p. 50.

12. *Holy Mother*, p. 246.

IMAGES OF INDIA'S PAST

Destruction of Viharas

Muhammad Ghuri's freelancer, Ikhtiyar-ud-din Muhammad Bakhtyar Khalji, was famous for many plundering expeditions. He went with 200 horsemen and seized Odantapuri, Bihar, probably in 1200 CE. It was a *vihara*, a Buddhist monastic university town, with hundreds of shaven-headed monks and students. It was easy, therefore, for Khalji and his 200 soldiers to put to death all the inhabitants, who offered no resistance at all. The hero then entered the precincts, plundering and destroying all Buddha images of infidels and saw a great library. It was ruthlessly torpedoed. When one of the soldiers wanted to know what those manuscripts contained, no one was there to explain—all monks had been killed. The library was burnt, and the great leader was victorious. None of his soldiers was hurt! (Cf. *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Struggle for Empire*, ed. R.C. Mazumdar, p. 123.)

A Great Queen

On his deathbed, Sultan Iltutmish was worried about successor. His sons were wicked. He therefore placed his able daughter Raziya on the throne (in 1229 CE). The night Iltutmish died, the nobles went against Raziya and put the eldest son, Firuz, on the throne. This fellow proved his worth within a few months, and thus Raziya was reinstated. Till treachery sought her out like a hound, Raziya, calling herself Raziyatuddin, wore men's clothes, moved about fearlessly among the people, and was 'a great sovereign, sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the learned, a dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects, and of warlike talents...but as she did not attain the destiny in her creation of being computed among men, of what advantage were all these excellent qualifications to her?' comments *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*. Her rule was shortlived: only three years. (Cf. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, p. 226.)

A Cultured Viewpoint

'The whole synthesis of Indian life and thought from the time of Asoka down to the present day is written down in its craft traditions, forming a priceless record of a great civilisation to which the whole world is deeply indebted. No civilisation, ancient or modern, has produced a higher culture, no other has succeeded better in making religion the philosophy of life, and on the whole probably no other has contributed so much to human knowledge. All Indo-Aryan religion...is founded upon the greatest of all scientific truths—the reality of divine revelation or inspiration. That was the great secret of the Rishis which they so jealously guarded for posterity, seeking for humanity's sake to find the way by which the pure in heart may come to drink at the divine well of knowledge the elixir of immortality—the all-pervading truth which must be the mainspring of every right human action,' writes E.B. Havell in *A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilisation* (p. 220).

Samsara or the World Phenomenon: Different Perspectives

SWAMI TYAGANANDA

After a successful tenure of over a decade as editor of The Vedanta Kesari, Swami Tyaganandaji, who has also edited several books, is presently at Boston, USA. On invitation, he presented this paper at a symposium conducted by the Vedanta Society of Northern California on a subject which forms this brilliant article's title.

Two questions dominate our hearts from early childhood. The first question is, who am I? And the second question is, what is this other thing that is not me? or what is *that* thing over there? Although we do not always express them openly, these questions never really go away. As we grow older, various answers come from various sources. The question 'who am I?' for instance, can be answered in so many ways. If someone were to ask me who I am, I can say I am Swami Tyagananda. I can say I am a human being. I can define myself in terms of my nationality, my race, my gender, my social group, my religious affiliation. A person could say, I am an American, I am a Serb, I am a woman, I am the boss, I am a Jew. Any such statement can answer the question 'who am I?'

It is the same with the other question: 'what is this?' or 'what is that?' The answer could be, this is a chair, that is a squirrel, this is a computer, that is the moon. Because of the infinite number of things around us, 'what is this?' or 'what is that?' can be answered in an infinite number of ways, depending on which 'this' or 'that' we are referring to. All this-s and that-s taken together form what is generally called the 'world'.

How are the world and I related? How are you and I connected? The attempts to find the connection have led many people eventually to a transcendent being or reality or ideal.

A popular name for this transcendent something or someone is God. But any other name—or no name at all—would be equally fine. What is interesting is that this transcendent reality or ideal often becomes a kind of key to the understanding of how the world and I are related.

All religious traditions deal with these three basic entities: the individual, the world, and the transcendent Reality. One of the things that distinguish religious traditions from one another is the explanation of the way these three are interrelated. So when we share insights about the world phenomenon—our subject for this symposium—we have to take into account the other two, the I-phenomenon and the God-phenomenon, as well. It is only by reviewing their interrelationships that some measure of understanding of the world can be achieved.

Just as we have many different perceptions of the I-phenomenon and the God-phenomenon, we have also many different perceptions of the world phenomenon. In the Indian tradition itself there are several of these. I shall briefly deal with five of them before summarizing my thoughts on the subject.

World Phenomenon as Cosmic Sacrifice

According to the Veda, the ancient scripture of the Hindus, there exists a transcendent

self-regulating order or harmony in the universe. In Sanskrit it is called *ṛtam*. In the Chinese tradition it is called Tao. In the Greek tradition, Logos was the word used to signify a somewhat similar idea. All distinctions and differences are harmonized in this great universal order. It connects the individual, God, and the world by the principle of interdependence, and it unites these three into one cosmic whole. When we live in harmony with this cosmic order, we experience peace and fulfilment. When we start dancing to another tune, we create conflicts, we destroy peace, and we suffer. Some of us may be already experiencing peace and harmony of sorts, but it could be a make-believe experience. Deep down within us are the seeds of dissatisfaction, anger, anxiety, and guilt, and these pop up now and then, shattering our so-called harmony.

In order to regain genuine harmony, we have got to return to the original tune and resume dancing in step with the universal order. We have got to change the course of our life and rechannel it along the course of the universal life. How is this to be done, is the question. In India, God is sometimes looked upon as the Teacher of all teachers. The *Yoga Sūtras*, one of India's ancient spiritual texts, says: 'Not being limited by time, God is the Teacher of even the ancient teachers.' Like all good teachers, God sets an example to others through his own way of doing things.

This is described in one of the ancient portions of the *R̥g Veda* called the 'Puruṣa Sūkta'. This hymn presents a powerful imagery in a poetic way. We are told that the universe was projected as a result of the self-sacrifice of God. It is not some ancient, one-time act. His sacrifice is continual. The word used in the Vedas is *yajña*. God's sacrifice is still going on. It is not a matter of belief, it is a matter of perception. We can see God's *yajña* or sacrifice if we really put our mind to it. Visualize the whole universe as one big altar

on which an eternal sacrifice is in progress. God is continually offering himself as an oblation in this sacrifice. Because of this self-immolation, his limbs and organs come apart and become the various objects of the world. His inexhaustible energy powers the intricate world-machinery.

This never-ending process has set into motion life's self-renewing cycles—the circulation of water, for instance. We know that the rivers carry water to the sea and the rains bring it back to the land. Or witness the cycle in the food-chain that sustains all living creatures. Or the movement of galaxies, the motion of the planets, oceanic and atmospheric currents. All these are cogs in the one big universal machine which is perennially powered by the cosmic sacrifice of God. He is unceasingly manifesting everything—matter and energy, love and knowledge, and every 'this' and 'that' of the world.

God's cosmic sacrifice is the source of energy for every being, which includes you, me and all of us. Every one of us has only limited time—just how limited no one knows in advance—to take part in this sacrifice, and once our time is over, we ourselves get sacrificed to make place for another living being. If we live in such a way as to maintain the continuity of the sacrifice, we experience peace, joy and freedom. If we place hurdles on the way and try to obstruct the cosmic cycle, we suffer from restlessness, despondency, and bondage.

This is one way of understanding the world phenomenon—as a cosmic sacrifice. The benefits this sacrifice brings to the world can come to us too if we convert our own life into a miniature sacrifice. This will activate self-renewing cycles at all levels of our individual life—physical, mental, and spiritual. When our own little sacrifice gets coupled with the cosmic sacrifice, we experience inner growth and harmony, a life of increasing

peace, joy and freedom.

World Phenomenon as Cosmic Union

Suppose we stop focusing on the sacrificial nature of life. Instead, we devote our energies to participating consciously in this cosmic drama. Then we find that the world takes on a different hue. Instead of the cosmic sacrifice, we begin to see it as the cosmic union. The Sanskrit word for union is *yoga*.

God's continual sacrifice is a wholly conscious process. In fact, God is identified with consciousness in the Indian tradition. There is this definitive statement in the Veda: '*prajñānam brahma*—Brahman, or God, is consciousness.' God's conscious participation in the cosmic drama converts the act of sacrifice into the experience of union and the realization of oneness. Everything in this world is joined to every other through the principle of interdependence. For an apple to come into existence there must be sunlight, rain, organic plant food and, of course, an apple tree. All these contribute to the birth of an apple. Without these, there would be no apple. But all these ingredients themselves are products of several other things. There can be no rain without clouds, for instance. On and on we can go, tracing the sources of every ingredient, and before long we shall discover that the whole universe exists in an apple.

We see, therefore, that things not only *depend on* one another, they also *exist in* one another in a subtle way. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has coined the word 'interbeing' which expresses the idea perfectly. So interbeing—instead of mere interdependence—is a better way to describe the idea of union, or joining, or what in India is called *yoga*. God's conscious participation in the cosmic sacrifice, which involves the regulation of the entire manifested universe, is cosmic *yoga*. In the *Gītā* (9.5 and 11.8) this is called divine *yoga*.

As individuals we are already a part of the cosmic sacrifice. From the world we are continuously receiving food and knowledge. These undergo certain changes within us and are returned to the world in the form of the work that we do. Nobody can retain more than what is necessary or more than what he or she deserves. Everything else gets recycled into the cosmic machine.

We may not be aware of this process or we may not like this process. But that hardly matters. The only choice we have is in the nature of our participation. Like God, should we participate in it consciously? Or like automaton, should we live a mechanical life? If we participate in the sacrifice consciously, converting our own little lives into a mini *yoga*, all peace and joy become ours. According to the *Gītā* (3.9) we suffer and live in bondage only because we are either not aware of the sacrificial nature of life or do not consciously participate in the cosmic sacrifice.

Since human beings are of various types, there are various types of *yoga*. It was the genius of Swami Vivekananda that classified all the known types into four basic paths—the path of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*), the path of devotion (*bhakti yoga*), the path of work (*karma yoga*) and the path of meditation (*rāja yoga*). It is remarkable that any spiritual practice of any tradition can easily be pigeonholed in any of these four types. This system of classification is universal because it is based on the primary orientations of the human mind to reality. Any *yoga*, if practised correctly, is a potent method of eliminating self-alienation and integrating one's personality.

This, then, is the second way of understanding the world—as cosmic union, or divine *yoga*.

World Phenomenon as Cosmic Person

Instead of focusing on the sacrificial nature of life or on our conscious participation

in it, if we focus our attention on the world around us, we might see something we have never seen before. But we need to look very mindfully, taking deep and long breaths, if necessary! If we are lucky to get perfectly in tune with the deeper reality underlying the world, we shall stop seeing the world as a material, nonliving, nonconscious place, and behold instead an enormously huge living being stretched in all directions. This is not poetic fancy. It is a matter of perception. It is a matter of experience. Mystics have seen the world as a living entity—a cosmic being pulsating with life.

After experience comes the explanation, an attempt to make sense of what one has seen. The Vedic thinkers identified the world with the body of God. We find this in one of the Upanishads: 'The cosmic being fills all space like a huge immovable tree.' Virāt is the name the Vedic sages gave to this all-pervading being. Virāt means 'the huge' or 'the vast'. They conceived the world as an immensely vast and intricate system of life-energy (*prāṇa*), which is continuously emanating from God and is, at the same time, pervaded by God. The two are in dynamic contact. The world is the living body of God—and God is the soul or the inner self of the world.

Next, the Vedic thinkers turned their attention from the macrocosm (universal being) to the microcosm (individual being) and discovered that the two had the same blueprint. They found that the psychophysical life-system of a person was, so to speak, the body of the indwelling God (*antaryāmi*), the inner Controller—and the God within was the true self of the body-mind system.

If the world is indeed the body of God, taking good care of this world becomes a way of serving God. And if worship is looked upon as a form of loving service, serving the world becomes the same as worshipping God. Listen to the words of Swami Vivek-

ananda:

This is the only god that is awake—'everywhere his hands, everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything'—all other gods are sleeping. What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all around us, the Virat? When we have worshipped this, we shall be able to worship all other gods....The first of all worship is the worship of the Virat—of those around us.¹

Helping those that are in need without any selfish motive is a good way to serve the divine as Virāt. We know now that not only are human beings in need but also animals, plants and the environment. Indeed, today a lot of things on our planet Earth need our attention and service. Cruelty to animals, mindless deforestation, air and water pollution, addiction to drugs and alcohol—the work to prevent all these can also be done as a worship of the cosmic Person who appears as this world. Such selfless work produces both individual and collective good.

World Phenomenon as Cosmic Play

If we find the idea of God as the cosmic Person too mystical or too abstract or just unacceptable, there is another way of seeing him. How about God as a child? When little children go to the beach, they do not need any prodding to prance about in the water or to build sand castles. They do everything out of the fullness of their joyful heart. Some have tried to see the world phenomenon in this light. God the divine Child is playing alone on the timeless sands of the limitless ocean. In Sanskrit they call this divine play *līlā*.

Behold the divine Child playing! Galaxies and planets, suns and moons, mountains and rivers, lakes and forests, animals and plants, and of course, humans of all hues and

1. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991), Vol. 3, p. 301.

views are the handiwork of this divine Child playing all by himself. And he plays on and on and on. No one knows when this play began. No one knows when this play will end. All we know is that the play is still going on.

It is not easy to appreciate this view of the world. Our joys can be a part of the divine play, no problem there, but what about our sorrows and suffering? The divine Child is having a good time, but what about us who are getting crushed in the process? It is possible that our aches and pains, our sorrow and suffering, are caused by some basic problem, and if we can fix that one, all other problems will automatically vanish.

Consider the author of a novel. Her creative energies produce a gripping story with all the ingredients that could make a blockbuster movie. The story has plenty of fun, scenes of love and tenderness, but it also has moments of sadness and tragedy. Some of its characters are exceptionally good people, but some others are crooks, real villains. Remember, these people and the events in their lives are the creations of the author of the novel. She is playing with them. She can undo all the problems or she can create more problems. That is her wish. It is after all *her* story. Now, suppose the characters in the story begin to complain and accuse the author—'How dare you play with our lives in this way?' What will the author say to them?

Those who have learnt to look upon the world as a cosmic play of God—or as *lilā*—understand that they are characters created by God in his fascinating, overwhelming, and at times unbearably painful, blockbuster called the world. Each of us is a product of God's creative energy, and therefore, we are inseparably linked with him. The moment we characters in this story begin to think we have an identity independent from that of the author or that we are intrinsically separate from the author, all the problems in the story become,

so to speak, our own and we suffer. This alienation from our creator is the cause of all mischief.

So we need to remind ourselves that the divine Child is playing all alone. There are no 'others' there. It is only because we see ourselves as 'other' than God that we suffer. God alone exists. Vedanta says that if we can really surrender ourselves to God and remove the sense of other-ness from him, we shall cease to be playthings and find ourselves to be play-makers instead. God's play eventually turns out to be our own play.

What we need is to recover our lost innocence and spontaneity. This does not happen easily. There is a lot of struggle involved, but at the end of it, we are able to look upon the whole world as the playground of God. Joy and sorrow, good and evil, life and death—everything then can be accepted as a part of the divine play. This attitude does not make people condone evil, ignore pain, or wink at injustice. On the other hand, they are able to put all their experiences in perspective and then, calmly and decisively, do what ought to be done in every situation. With tension-free minds they discover new beauty and meaning in life, which produces in their heart deep peace and joy. And these they share spontaneously with others around them.

World Phenomenon as Cosmic Mystery

If none of the models of the world described so far seems to be our cup of tea, not to worry, there is one more! Some of us might say, 'I do not understand the world as a cosmic sacrifice or a cosmic union, and I certainly cannot see the world as the cosmic person or the cosmic play. The world is a mystery to me. I just cannot make any sense out of it.' If the world is a mystery to me, I *am*, in fact, understanding the world as a mystery. This is a good way of perceiving the world—the world as a cosmic mystery. In Sanskrit the word

used to denote this idea is *māyā*.

Why do we feel the world to be a kind of mystery? Because it throws up only questions, no answers. The more we study the world, the crazier it appears. A bundle of contradictions is what this world is. Consider these facts. We have the sense of freedom when we make choices and take decisions, but at every step we also discover that we are not really free. Something or someone makes us happy, but we discover that the same thing or person can also make us miserable at times. Worse, we are not able to let go even when that something or someone becomes a source of pain. Learning is a joyful experience, but we find that the more we know, the more we discover what we do *not* know. Every ounce of knowledge reveals to us the dismal depth of our ignorance. We see people dying but we discover that in our heart is the persistent feeling that we shall live forever. Freedom and bondage, joy and sorrow, knowledge and ignorance, life and death—which of these is real?

When we are faced with such contradictions in life, some of us may begin wondering at the very concept of reality. When we say that something is real, what do we mean exactly? We know that dreams are not real because they do not last. But we find that the waking experience does not last either. If my dream-world disappears when I wake up, my waking-world disappears when I sleep. As long as I am awake I know this world to be very real, but in the same way, as long as I am dreaming I see the dream-world to be very real too. The more we think along these lines, the more we see the similarity between the two, the waking-world and the dream-world. Which of these is *really* real? And why and where do these both disappear when we are fast asleep? What about the world free from all duality that we experience in our deep sleep? Is *that* real?

Vedanta teachers say that the world is a mystery. It is a curious mixture of reality and unreality. It is real because all of us experience it. It is also unreal because at times—like a magician's phantasmagoria—it vanishes altogether. In Sanskrit there is a special word to denote the idea of something which is not real but appears to be real. The word is *mithyā*. When we mistake the rope for a snake in a dimly lit room, the snake is not altogether unreal. If it were, we would never have seen it. Nor is it real, obviously. So it is called *mithyā*, because it appears to be real for a time. Similarly, the world appears to be real for a time. So long as we are caught in this appearance of the world's reality, we find ourselves bereft of freedom, true joy and lasting peace. Once we solve the mystery, we find that God alone is truly real—and we regain our innate freedom, joy and peace.

How do we solve this mystery of the world? According to Vedanta, the first requirement—an obvious one—is that we must want to solve this mystery. If we want to solve it, then the next thing we need to do is round the suspects, that means, all those who make the world seem mysterious. When the suspects are lined up, the culprit can be identified. Ignorance of our true nature is the culprit, says Vedanta. If we can get in touch with the deepest core of our personality, our true Self (*ātman*)—then the mystery will be solved for us. The way to do it is through yoga. We have already referred to the idea of yoga, when we discussed seeing the world as cosmic union.

Many Models, One Truth

We have seen five different paradigms through which the world can be viewed—the world as cosmic sacrifice, cosmic union, cosmic person, cosmic play, and cosmic mystery. We have also seen how, in each of these models, the world phenomenon is connected with the I-phenomenon and the God-phenomenon.

Which of these models is the best? Which is true? Which is accurate? According to Vedanta, every one of these models is good, true and accurate in its own way. Every one of these models can make life meaningful and launch us on the journey to total fulfilment and freedom. These models are not exclusive of one another. They kind of merge into each other in some ways. In any case, each model has its own speciality and emphasis. We are free to choose any model that suits our temperament and aspiration.

You may have marked one feature which is common to all these different perceptions of the world. And that common feature is 'change'. In none of the models is the world an unchanging, unmoving entity. That is why in Sanskrit the world phenomenon is often expressed by the word *samsāra*. Literally *samsāra* means 'that which passes away or moves on,' and we know how true it is with regard to the world. Nothing in this world is permanent, nothing is stationary. There is constant movement, constant change—constant whirl-

ing in the circle of birth, growth, decay, and death, constant shuttling between the poles of appearance and disappearance, and constant bobbing up and down in the tumultuous ocean of life.

In the Vedantic tradition, God is the only reality. The world, including you and me, is not regarded as something or someone separate from God. No matter which idea of the world we feel comfortable with, no matter which frame of reference we choose to answer the two questions, 'who am I?' and 'what is this?' a time will come for every one of us when we shall realize the truth of what the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* says, '*Puruṣa eva idaṁ sarvaṁ*—God alone is all this.' The I-phenomenon, the world phenomenon and the God-phenomenon will all merge into the reality or being which is beyond all phenomena. That being is ever-free, ever-blissful, and eternal—and we shall find ourselves one with that being. Out of nowhere an echo that is not an echo will be heard by no one in particular: '*so'ham, so'ham*—I am He, I am He.' □

Sufi Mystics and Renunciation

The ascetic practices of the early Sufis...included renunciation of the world, the acceptance of poverty, self-abnegation and self-discipline. Al-Ghazali writes that 'the doctrine which has for its aim this state (*zuhd*=renunciation) consists in knowing that what is renounced is of little value in comparison with what is received. It is like the knowledge of the merchant who knows that what he receives in exchange for his merchandise is worth more than what he sells, and so he desires the sale. Whoever has not this knowledge cannot detach himself from the merchandise. So he who has understood that what belongs to God is abiding and that the other life is better and more lasting than this (ie, that its joys are better in themselves and more lasting), as jewels are better and more durable than snow, desires to exchange this life for that other. No one who is possessed of snow would find any hardship in exchanging it for jewels and pearls. For this world is like snow exposed to the sun, which continues to melt until it disappears altogether, while the next life is like a precious stone which never passes away.'

—from Margaret Smith, *The Way of the Mystics*

Christian Spirituality in the 12th Century: The Victorians

FR JOHN B. SIMON-VERMOT, CR

This is Christmas month, so let us study a remarkable school of Christianity. Himself a canon regular, the Rev Fr Simon-Vermot, from the Abbaye de St Maurice, Switzerland, gives a comparative account of the soul's ascent as taught in the Victorian school.

The Encounter of Religions

Wonderful are the ways of the Lord! During the past centuries and millenniums, His Spirit awakened many religious traditions in different countries; and in our days, due to the progressive unification of the planet, all these religious currents meet and mingle like in a melting pot. We may guess that it is not without significance. The human family is one; it has the same origin and the same destiny, which is God, the ultimate Reality. God's intention seems, by sending sages, saints and prophets, to educate humankind and lead it progressively towards Him. Each religious tradition has a special message to convey and manifests a particular aspect of the divine Mystery. In the present state of the human civilization, it seems that all traditions are called upon to develop themselves and to flow in a convergent way, so that they may enrich humanity with whatever is good in them. Hence the importance of mutual understanding, esteem and love, the benefit of exchanges, the practice of inter-religious dialogue. The critical point for the adept of any religion is to keep the difficult equilibrium between unbiased openness to others and perfect faithfulness to one's own identity.

A very good way to promote this mutual understanding is to know the basic scriptures of other religions as well as their spiritual masters. With this end in view, we would like to present briefly, from among the many religious currents of Christianity, a medieval

monastic tradition—the school of Saint-Victor.

The Abbey of Saint-Victor

In the 12th century there lived near Paris a religious community which was to play a lasting role in the religious ferment of France and other European countries: the Abbey of Saint-Victor. It was founded in 1108 by Guil-



The Abbey of Saint-Victor

laume de Champeaux (William of Champeaux, born 1070), formerly a scholar and professor at the university of Paris. After some years of teaching, attracted by a life of solitude and contemplation, Guillaume renounced the world and retired into a small hermitage with a few companions. Such a decision was by no means unusual at that time. The 12th century was an epoch of great revival in Christianity, with young people joining monasteries in great numbers. This enthusiasm spread more and more all over Europe. Two main types of monasteries ex-

isted in those days. Many, like the Benedictines, Cistercians, Carthusians, etc, led a purely contemplative life, while others, like regular canons, combined monastic practices with priestly activities in favour of the faithful. The religion of Saint-Victor adopted this latter way of life; like all regular canons, they followed the rule of St Augustine, which begins with these words: 'Above all, dear brothers, let us love God and our neighbour.... Since you are gathered in a community, live in perfect harmony, have only one heart and one soul aspiring to God.' Common life was therefore essential to them. Having renounced private property, everything among them was simple and collective, and they lived a life of perpetual celibacy, devoting their time both to prayer, study and work, as also to the spiritual care of the people and service in local churches.

Thought and Spirituality of the Victorians

After this exterior approach of the Victorians, let us try to understand the core of its message. For the Victorians, doctrine and spiritual life were intimately connected. A doctrine is like a *darśana*; it is the source of both intellectual reflection and mystical experience. Grounded as they were in Christian faith, they always started from the Word of God spoken in the Bible. Scripture—the Old and New Testaments—was the source of their intellectual reflection and spiritual quest. It would therefore be difficult to understand the Victorians without at least some idea of the tenets of Christian faith.

The Christian Vision of Existence

According to Christian revelation, God is the ultimate, infinite Reality, the self-existent Being, absolutely One, in spite of the fact that His inner life blossoms, as it were, into the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—a notion which reminds in some way of the Hindu *saccidānanda*, and which manifests the fullness and infinite richness of the divine life.

God is the source of the universe; He created it from nothing but Himself, and this modifies Him in no way. He is the creator

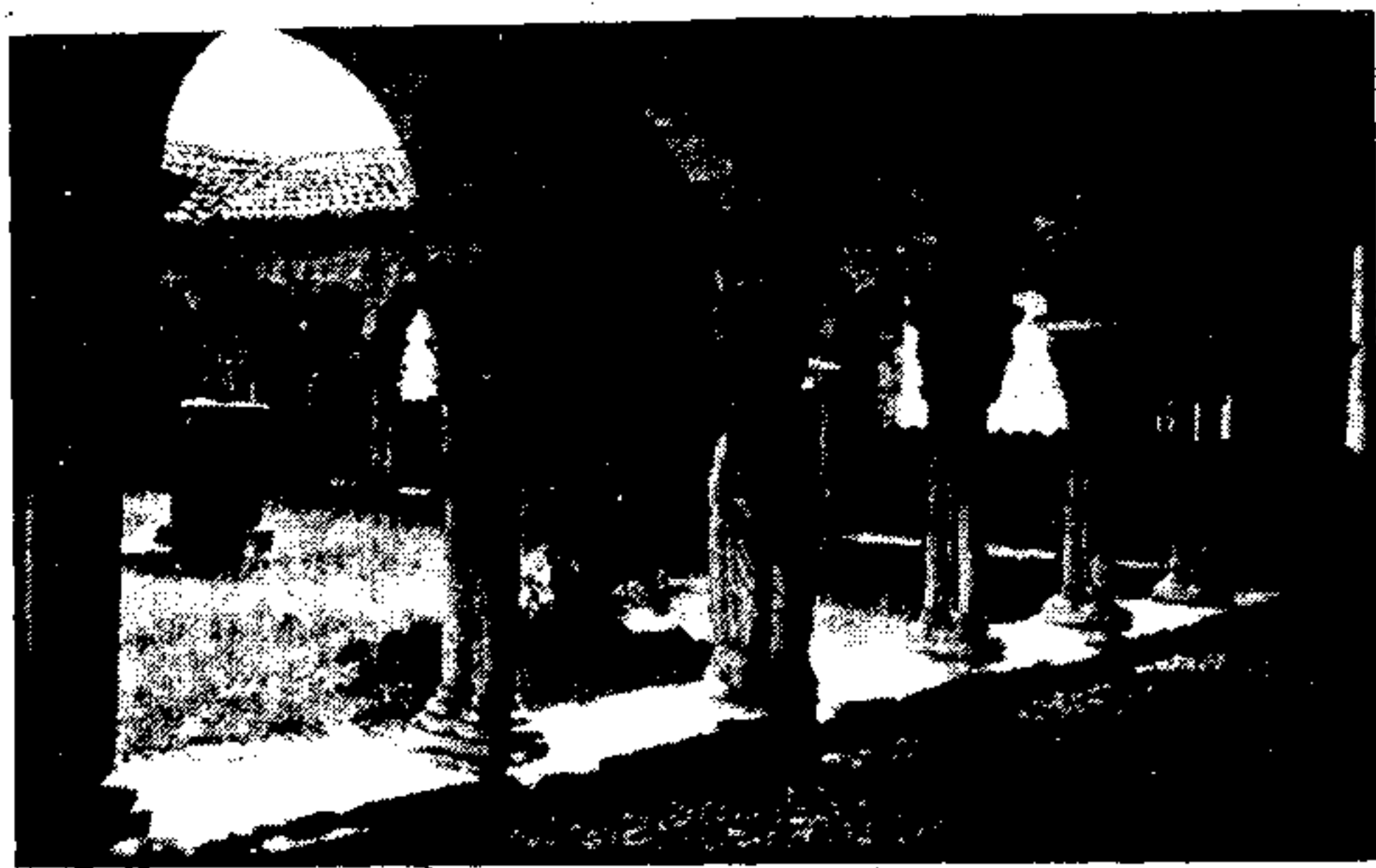
especially of man. Man is the link between the pure Spirit and the material world, and is made 'in the image and likeness of God.' Man was destined to participate according to the plan of God, but sin cut him away from Him. Out of His merciful love, however, God restored His initial plan by sending His Son, who incarnated himself and redeemed humankind by his sacrifice on the cross. Hence Christ is the centre of the Christian faith insofar as through him and by the inner and universal action of his spirit men are able to fulfil their essential vocation—to be one with God, to participate in the divine plan. The purpose of incarnation is well expressed by this central teaching of the Early Fathers of the Church: 'God became man so that man may become God.' Jesus' prayer resounds in the same way: 'That they all may be one; as thou, Father, *art* in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us...' (St John, 17. 21).

Deepening of the Word of God

Such a doctrine which, in spite of undeniable differences and in many respects close to the worldviews of Hinduism and Buddhism, was for the Victorians much more than a conceptual system of thought. It was a living intuition; in fact, nothing else than the fathomless Word of God. Being the divine Mystery, it can be approached only in silence. The Victorians knew very well that it cannot be grasped by mere rational thought, but only realized in some way in mystical experience, and it was their intense aspiration to dive deeper and deeper into it. What is noteworthy is that in this deepening they proceeded slowly, by degrees, in a very coherent and psychological way. Let us follow them in their inner journey and we shall see that it is a progressive ascent to God, in which several degrees—or better, levels of consciousness—have to be gone through.

The Intellectual Level

In Christian monasteries, monks used to practise what is called 'divine lecture' (*lectio divina*); it is the simple reading, oral or mental, of a biblical text. Material reading, of course,



Cloister where monks meditate or practise the 'divine lecture'

is not sufficient: the content of the sacred text has to be understood. However, the first need is of the *literal* or historical meaning. The Victorians took great care to grasp that literal meaning correctly. They had recourse to all the sciences of their time: a knowledge not only of Latin but also of Greek and Hebrew, and of grammar, logic, geography, history, music, etc. Now, behind the literal meaning lies a deeper one, the *allegorical* meaning, which reveals the doctrinal content of the Bible. With a keen and searching mind, Hugh and Richard, the two best theologians and spiritual writers of the Saint-Victor school, discovered above all a holistic meaning of the Bible, which they expressed in a coherent theological synthesis, as would St Augustine

in later times in his famous *Summa Theologica*.¹

The Spiritual Level

Though gifted in expressing religious doctrines in a systematic way, the Victorians were not satisfied with a mere intellectual approach. Above the literal and allegorical sense of the Bible, their attention was mostly attracted by the *spiritual* meaning, which alone opens the way for the experience of God in the heart. Mere cleverness of mind is unable to discover it; meditation and inner transformation are needed. The 'third eye', as they say, has to be opened. This is wisdom, in which comes the 'interior man'.

Indeed the path towards wisdom is gradual. First, obstacles coming in the form of egotism, pride, violence and all bad tendencies have to be removed by gaining control over the body and mind. This requires a patient education, and the monastic austerities which the monks practised in the Abbey of Saint-Victor favoured it very much. They also found help for purification of heart in the lessons of the Bible, which provide so many examples of saintly figures, parables, living stories, etc. Interpreted in this way, the scripture gives the *tropological* or moral meaning, which is the first aspect of the spiritual meaning. But underneath lies another one, the *analogical* meaning, by which are disclosed divine mysteries leading to contemplative

when the soul discovers God in itself; and (3) *contemplatio*, when the soul gains a supernatural intuition of God. Richard of Saint-Victor was Hugh's student. He was probably born in Scotland but passed away at Saint-Victor in 1173. His treatises (*Benjamin Minor*, *Benjamin Major*, and *De Trinitate*) have influenced mysticism greatly. Like his preceptor, Richard also was for learning. Dante regards Richard as the greatest among the teachers of the Christian Church. According to Richard, the soul begins its spiritual journey from the stage of sense perception to that of spiritual ecstasy by following the methods of imagination, reason, and intuition. —Editor

1. The Schaff-Herzog *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* as well as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* give details about these two great saints. Hugh (also Hugo) of Saint-Victor was born in 1096. Hugh was an eminent scholastic theologian and author of several works, important among them being *De Arca Morali*, *De Arca Mystica*, and *De Vanitate Mundi* (earlier ones), and *Eruditio Didascalica* and *Sacramenta*. It was he who initiated the mystical tradition in the school of Saint-Victor. Hugh was for learning: he said that learning, secular and spiritual, was important. According to Hugh, contemplative life consisted of three stages: (1) *cogitatio*, when the soul's eye sees God in the things of the world; (2) *meditatio*,

union with God. For Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor, this meaning was the most important, because it opened the path of ascent to God.

The Sense of Interiority

The ascent to God implies not only good outer moral conduct, as is shown by the tropological meaning, but also interiority and unification of the whole being. Man has to enter into himself so as to replace outgoing tendencies by ingoing tendencies, as the Upanishads teach with so much stress. Only then can he awaken to his centre. This is what the Victorians call self-knowledge or discovery of oneself as the image of God. 'If the mind has not yet been able to gather itself together into unity, and does not know to enter into itself, when will it be able to ascend by contemplation to those things which are above itself (God)?' Richard asks. Man is spirit, the likeness of God; unless he realizes his nature as spirit, he cannot commune with Him. All the writings of Hugh and Richard are imbued with this sense of interiority which is a prerequisite to the ascent to God. Rather than an ascent, we could speak of a descent into one's own depths as well: 'To ascend to God means to enter into oneself, and not only to enter into oneself, but in some ineffable manner to penetrate even into one's own depths.'

Now to attain in this ascent the apex of the soul, or if we prefer its inmost centre, is to realize its own real nature. Here we meet a universal dimension found in all cultures and religions. In the Upanishads, the sages realize the eternal and blissful Atman, the 'Self within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice...or a grain of millet...greater than the earth...greater than the sky' (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 3.14.3). The goal of Buddhism is to attain illumination, *śūnya*, emptiness, where buddhahood or the inner nature of man and of all being is realized.

Here too, like in many religious currents, we find the idea that the summit of the soul itself has to be transcended. For the Victorians, the image of God is not God, to reach the



The choir of the Abbey of St Maurice

peak of the spirit is not yet to encounter God Himself. One has still to go beyond the peak of the self to be lifted off into the wide expanse of God. Then only God is able to grasp and enrapture the soul, whose prayer then becomes passive, whereas previously it was active and laborious. Richard calls this state *divine contemplation*: it replaces *human contemplation* which was prevailing in the beginning, in the first spiritual states. Although we must carefully avoid confusion between the specific perspectives of each religion, do we not find the same idea in the *Bhagavadgītā*, where it deals with the way of devotion or *bhakti*?

Progressive Union with God

In the teachings of Saint-Victor, divine contemplation itself is a progressive entrance into the mystery of God. It comprises several degrees. At first, when God invades the soul, it experiences a sweetness and peace altogether unknown before: 'A taste sweeter than honey penetrates the soul and inebriates it

with its sweetness.... In this state, the soul is led by God in solitude' (Richard in *The Four Degrees of Ardent Love*). This is the first degree. Then, in the words of Richard, God 'wounds' the soul with His ardent love. St Theresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic of the 16th century, gives a similar teaching in her *Interior Castle* when she describes the 'prayer of quietude.' In it the Lord communicates silently without words in the depths of the soul, beyond all discursive thought, transforming inwardly the heart, burning it with His love. 'The water which springs up and the joy felt at the moment comes from an inmost depth which is, it seems to me, the centre of the soul. When this celestial water flows, our whole interior being widens and expands' (*Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansion, Chapter 2).

Let us, however, pay attention to what Richard says: 'God (in that state) gives the feeling of His presence without yet showing His face. One feels His sweetness, but without seeing His beauty; the soul is still shrouded in clouds and mist.' Only in the following degree, 'the second degree of divine contemplation,' are the deepest recesses of the soul invaded and seized by God. And then in that state, the soul is so strongly taken by the Spirit that it cannot doubt His lasting presence. It is a state of illumination in which 'not only the will, but the spirit too is pervaded by God and enlightened by Him. It is, as it were, above the clouds, and already something of the divine face shines upon it. That illumination leaves

in the memory a lasting, eternal remembrance which binds the soul so forcefully that it cannot forget anymore the joy it has felt' (*The Four Degrees of Ardent Love*).

However, the soul has still to go further in the spiritual path, for, to quote a great Cistercian monk, St Bernard, 'the measure of the love of God is to love Him without measure.' The soul then enters the third degree of love. A comparison may help us to understand this degree. The iron is in itself cold, black and hard. But if we put it into the fire, little by little it loses its dark colour, becomes red, and soon looks exactly like the fire. In the end it even melts and becomes liquid: it ceases to be itself, and is thoroughly transformed into another matter, the fire, as it were. So with the soul. 'It is consumed by divine love, surrounded on all parts by the flames of eternal desires, becomes glowing, gets overheated to the point that finally it melts completely, losing its previous state. In that degree, not only the deepest centre of the soul is taken by the Spirit, but the whole being is transformed. In that state the one who attaches himself to God becomes one spirit with Him,' says Richard.

Yet love is a boundless power, it pushes the soul higher. In the fourth degree, it is so forgetful that it passes thoroughly in God, letting God live and act alone in it. The human spirit is completely dead to itself, the divine Spirit alone lives in the devotee. In the words of St Paul: '...I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (*Galatians*, 2.20). Realizing fully the words of Christ who said that 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (*St John*, 15.13), the mystic follows, nay, reproduces in himself, the redeeming sacrifice of Christ, who gave himself till the death on the cross. In Him he gives himself in a complete self-denial to God and to his brethren, and this even in the most ordinary life. Thus his deepest union with God, far from separating him from the world, is for him the best way to commune with men and with the universe. It is the source of a



A processional entry before liturgical service

profound and intense activity. Activity is for him at last the same thing, in a way, as contemplation. It has become like a burning fire enlightening and warming suffering humanity all around. This reminds us of the 'return to the market-place' of the Zen Buddhists. So also Ramakrishna, after periods of intense samadhi, devoted much of his attention and time to the service of others.

Surely these lines are a very simple explanation, but they may suffice to suggest possible contacts between Indian and Christian spirituality, and even encourage further

research. For instance, Hindu readers will easily observe that Saint-Victor's spirituality is in the line of *bhakti*. Let them not forget, however, that in Christianity other currents are found too, like the so-called 'Renan mystics' who are more in the line of *jñāna* and *advaita*. Anyhow, what matters above all in these spiritual questions is that they contribute to kindle our desire to grow in the love of the Lord, and help us to be more conscious of our divine vocation. Whatever be our religion, this is the final goal in which we all commune. □

Christ and Christianity

Jesus Christ was born of Jewish parents, and was educated in the Jewish tradition. He spoke in the Aramaic language. He taught the Jews in and around Jerusalem, for 'I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (*Matthew*, 15.24). The Jewish religion was called 'Judaism' (*Ioüdaïsmos*) by Paul for the first time. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, used the term 'Christianity' (*Christianismos*) for the first time, one hundred years after Christ's passing away. What was the fundamental teaching of Christ? The 'Sermon on the Mount' (*Matthew*, 5), the 'Lord's Prayer' (*Matthew*, 6.9-12) and the Parables constitute his fundamental teachings. Jesus Christ's basic teachings could be summed up in his own words: 'Thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (*Matthew*, 22.37-39). Who is this God Christ speaks of? God is the 'Final Cause', the goal of all creation, is absolute simplicity, absolute perfection, absolute intelligence, absolute consciousness and absolute will. He is the Creator, the Father, who begot His only Son, who became man. This Son is the Logos. Apart from the Father and the son is the Holy Spirit, who works through them. What did God create, and how? God went out of Himself to produce (1) pure spirits or angels, (2) pure matter or the cosmos, and (3) man, who is a mixture of soul and body (ie, spirit and matter). Man was given two gifts by God—the gift of freedom from suffering and ignorance, called *preternatural*, and the gift of knowledge of God and sanctifying grace, called *supernatural*. Man was also endowed with free-will and it was this free-will which made him deny God's supremacy; this brought about a fall and 'original sin' on man. This fall led to the absolute denial of the first gift, *preternatural*. The second gift, *supernatural*, is denied but can be restored by Christ's atonement, and through sacraments. So, Christ is the medium through which human beings can attain lasting, supernatural happiness. Thus Christ's mission on earth was to redeem man from fall and bring him back to God.

The Role of Nonprofit Organizations in Tomorrow's India

SWAMI JITATMANANDA

(continued from the previous issue)

Religion for the Elevation of the Masses

In a nation which is predominantly religious since many millennia, the importance of religion can never be ruled out. Religion is the line of least resistance in India. Yet, religion, at least until the arrival of Vivekananda on the scene, largely remained a passive, other-worldly pursuit after liberation, at the cost of even minimum subsistence in ordinary life. That is why Vivekananda turned religion from God in temples to God in humanity. He saw that to offer religion to hungry millions is a mockery; it is a mistake to force higher truths on people who are not ready for them. So he said, 'What we want is not so much spirituality as a little of the bringing down of Advaita into the material world. First bread and then religion.'¹ Swamiji felt that religion itself must come out for human welfare. That is exactly what Lord Buddha did, too. He said to this effect, following the Upanishadic dictum: 'For the good of all, for the happiness of all, for compassion to human beings, for the enrichment of both the elevated and the downtrodden.'

Swami Vivekananda said in America: Whenever any religion succeeds, it must have economic value. ... Man is guided by his stomach. He walks and the stomach goes first and head afterwards.... It will take ages for the head to go first.²

By 1896 Vivekananda was trying to infuse the spirit of practical Vedanta from the West in Indian thinkers. To the editor of the *Light of the East*, he wrote: 'The Advaita is the eternal mine of strength. But it requires to be applied.'³ While the Upanishads had taught us to worship our father, mother, teacher and guest as gods, Swamiji added that we should worship the poor, the ignorant, and the afflicted as gods. True to the Vedantic spirit, he said, '*Daridradevo bhava, mūrkhadevo bhava.*' This idea of practical Vedanta was put forth as the motto of the Ramakrishna Mission, '*ātmano mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*, for one's own liberation as well as for the good of the world.' For the first time in history, the secular was turned into the sacred, turning all work into the worship of the Divine in the individual.

After nearly a hundred years, in 1993, the UNESCO director, Dr Frederico Mayer, said at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris during the centenary celebrations of Chicago's Parliament of Religions:

I was struck by the similarity of the articles of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission, which Vivekananda established in 1897, with those of UNESCO prepared in 1945. Both organizations have put human being as the centre for development. Both organizations have placed tolerance at the top of the agenda for building peace and democracy.⁴

1. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), Vol. 3, p. 432. [Hereafter *Complete Works*.]

2. Mary Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1990), Vol. 6, p. 204.

3. Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 228.

4. Quoted by N.S. Bose in his article in *Mahima Tava Udbhasita* (Bengali) (Dakshineswar: Sri Sarada Math, 1994).

The Ramakrishna Mission

Some decades ago, when some bureaucrats questioned the then chief minister of West Bengal, Dr B.C. Roy, as to why he allotted so much funds for the Ramakrishna Mission's service activities, his answer was, 'If we give one rupee to the Mission, the Mission begs one rupee more from somewhere and offers something to society worth two rupees, with which they also add their own lifelong sacrifice and first-grade service.' Today, two schools in West Bengal for which Dr Roy had offered funds have been adjudged the best schools in India according to the NCERT Project Report, released in 1991 by the Bhubaneswar Regional College of Education: the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalyaya, Narendrapur, and the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia. A special place of importance has been given to the Sri Ramakrishna Vidyashala, Mysore.

In March 1999, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission had 138 branches all over the world. During 1997-98 there were altogether 14 hospitals with 2,067 beds which served 67,357 in-patients and 22,78,261 out-patients. Among these hospitals are the Seva Prastishthan with 650 beds in Calcutta, the Polyclinic in Lucknow, the Hardwar, Varanasi and Trivandrum hospitals, the Ranchi and Delhi TB centres, and so on. Its 34 mobile dispensaries catered mostly to the needs of rural and tribal areas, treating about 8,70,650 cases. Some 96 out-patient dispensaries treated 27,27,476 cases that year. Sixteen eye camps were conducted. The total number of formal educational institutions run by the Mission was 336 with 5 degree colleges, 5 Teachers' Training Colleges, 326 schools of various grades, etc. Its 1,347 non-formal educational centres had about 2,07,455 students. In spite of the Ramakrishna Mission's uninterest in awards and accolades, several have been thrust upon it by the loving public. A few may be mentioned in passing: the Gandhi Peace Prize, the Krishi Vigyan Kendra award for 1997, the Indira Gandhi Award for Inter-

national Understanding, and so on.

The Ramakrishna Mission was described by its founder, Swami Vivekananda, as a 'purity-drilling machine'. Apart from all the above-mentioned service activities, the Mission provides spiritual guidance to help people manifest their innate divinity. And that is the most important of its activities.

Vedanta and the Problem of Privilege

What good will the ideology of practical Vedanta bring? Vivekananda answered, saying that if the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better student; if the lawyer thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer. Again, Advaita Vedanta strikes at the very root of all privileges:

I am clever in mending shoes, you are clever in reading the Vedas, but there is no reason why you should trample on my head.... Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go, there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head.⁵

It was Vivekananda who for the first time gave a clarion call to the backward classes to rise and absorb the social, moral, and spiritual excellences of the upper classes. In India true spiritual excellence, holiness, purity, and higher knowledge have always been honoured. It is therefore the duty of nonprofit organizations to bring not only economic welfare through agricultural, technological, scientific, or industrial training, but also spiritual excellence through regular spiritual culture offered to the social have-nots, tribals, or the so-called backward classes. Only economic welfare minus ethico-moral training is liable to turn both the leader and the labourer into tyrants, creating more problems within the family as well as at the

5. *Complete Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 245-6.

workplace. This attitudinal change, both in leaders and welfare recipients, is the only answer to stopping exploitation of backward classes, which is severely affecting our national life today. An excellent example of providing all-round help to the masses, of lifting them up on all fronts, is seen in the Ramakrishna Mission.

Knowledge Upgradation: A Vital Need

Nonprofit institutions need to know certain important things in order to work better. All these organizations are turning into knowledge societies today. Upgradation in knowledge is a must for all such organizations working for social welfare. Power has shifted in today's infotech societies from machines or capital to knowledge, as Alvin Toffler shows in his book, *Powershift*. New knowledge has to be acquired every four or five years, or workers will become obsolete. The need of nonprofit institutions today is the integration of specialized knowledge into a common goal of human welfare through concentrated teamwork. Sometimes, old organizations with old-generation leaders face tension between specialists with specialized, newer knowledge and the organization's need for these specialists to perform as a team with workers steeped in old ideas. Newer knowledge should be accepted but incorporated into the lifestyle of national culture and values. Knowledge of science and technology may change, but tradition and values abide.

For wider performance, our nonprofit institutions need a high degree of decentralization, able leadership, a correct futuristic vision, and an appropriate ideology suitable to this global age. Without such leadership and right vision, even the best nonprofit organizations are liable to be 'non-Prophet organizations'—rudderless, uninspired, and ending in non-performance. It is moral, ethical and spiritual training that inspires dedication and selflessness. Unless the position and power of nonprofit leaders are balanced by responsibility, it becomes tyranny, and degenerates into schism within the organiza-

tion. The responsibility of the leaders must be backed by a deep reverence for the same divinity in all people—irrespective of caste, creed, country, language, or religion. Vedanta asserts that infinite excellence, knowledge, power, purity and divinity are hidden in all human beings. Service, therefore, should be turned into a ceaseless effort to awaken the hidden altruistic excellences in people.

The attraction of India's nonprofit organizations today depends primarily on their universal, non-parochial, and human-centred ideology as also a shared mission. Without such a mission, organizations can lose credibility, and consequently diminish their ability to attract the very people they wish to serve. Loyalty can not be obtained by money alone, but by a genuine reverence for the people whom they serve.

Women's Regeneration and Spiritual Ideals

Many nonprofit institutions have come forward today to defend women against atrocities like bride-burning, gender inequalities, economic dependence on others, or exploitation in a male-dominated society. Yet deeper psycho-social problems linger. What are the ways of elevating Indian women? Education is the answer. But what kind of education? What is women's education? The traditional Indian idea is that any service offered to women is the worship of the Divine Mother, the embodiment of all power, in women. And this service to Uma Kumaris in all girls will, in time, bring out the purest and the strongest in all women. The liberty, dynamism, efficiency, and purity of the modern woman must be galvanized into the historic images of Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Ahalya Bai and Padmini. Is a combination of the modern spirit of independence, freedom, and dynamism with the traditional ideals of austerity, purity and chastity in woman's life be possible? Yes, it is. Indian women must rise to great heights and solve their own problems—social, economic, spiritual—with complete independence from male interference.

Indian civilization glorifies women as

mothers while the West glorifies women as wives. Indians think of even their nation as mother. Vivekananda foresaw the rise of Indian women in all spheres of our national life. 'The new cycle must see the masses living Vedanta, and this will have to come through women,' he declared.⁶ Post-independence India saw the phenomenal rise of Indian women with academic excellence, leading to their economic and social independence. What is required today is the systematic culture of spiritual independence and to stem the tide of modern sensate culture which is turning many young women into 'burnt-out cases' or anomies, ie, social outcasts due to moral lapses. Even in the West, women have realized the power of spiritual culture and have taken to meditation etc, for acquiring fulfilment and excellence. A women's liberation leader writes: 'We need meditations that help us discover trust and express our inner wisdom.... Meditating individually and collectively, we build a vision that helps us create the kind of world we want to live in, rather than waiting until after we have dismantled this (patriarchal) one.'⁷

India Tomorrow

'India will stand out as the centre of this civilization,' was Swamiji's prophecy. That time has come. Despite the unbelief of the so-called developed nations, India, and the whole of Asia, is experiencing a phenomenal rise. In 1918 Spengler, and in the 1930s Toynbee, denounced the myopic Western view of history with its 'egocentric illusions' that the world revolved around the West, that there was an 'unchanging East'. S.P. Huntington wrote in 1996 that 'India's power could grow substantially in the early twenty-first century.' He also expected Asian nations to 'decisively shape the character of the new world

order,' because 'Asian values are universal values.'⁸ Universalism is genetically encoded in the Indian psyche. The basic unity of all religions was declared nearly 4000 years ago by the Vedas. The well-known Vedic phrase is, 'Truth is One, sages call It by various names,' *ekam sat, viprā bahudhā vadanti*. 'The national ideals of India are renunciation and service. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care of itself,' declared Swamiji.⁹ In his last message to Indians on 16 August 1945, after the defeat of Azad Hind Fauz, Netaji Subhas Bose encouraged us thus:

You set a shining example of patriotism and self-sacrifice by pouring out men, money, and material into the struggle for India's independence.... I regret, more than you do, that your sufferings and sacrifices have not borne immediate fruit. But they have not gone in vain because they have ensured the emancipation of our motherland and will serve as an undying inspiration to Indians all over the world.... Above all, never for a moment falter in your faith in India's destiny. There is no power on earth that can keep India enslaved.¹⁰

Netaji's words came true: India attained freedom owing to the sacrifice of thousands. Later on, nonprofit organizations brought about a rejuvenation of the nation through a similar spirit of dedication: by sacrifice, renunciation of selfishness or the profit motive, and by the worship of God in the poor, the neglected and the backward of all classes, creeds, and religions. With this ideal the Indian nonprofit organizations have been working, and will go on in the new century to come, and help India emerge as the leader of world civilization. □

8. S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997), pp. 244, 109.

9. *Complete Works*, Vol. 5, p. 228.

10. G. Chattopadhyaya, *Subhas Chandra Bose: A Biography* (NCERT: 1997), Appendix VI.

6. *Complete Works*, Vol. 7, p. 95.

7. *Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Prejna Spretrak, pp. 295-6.

श्रीसारदाप्रपत्तिः

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

Swami Harshanandaji, President, Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, presents Śrī-sāradā-prapattiḥ, his offering to Holy Mother on her 146th birth anniversary, which falls on 29 December this year. The letters with which the first three lines of each stanza begin make up the mantra Om śrī-sāradā-devyai-namo.

ओंकारवेद्यस्य परात्परस्य
श्रीरामकृष्णस्य पराऽस्य शक्तिः।
सा मे गतिर्मुक्तिफलं च तस्याः
श्रीसारदायाश्चरणौ प्रपद्ये॥

I take refuge at the feet of Sri Sarada Devi who is the Supreme Power of Sri Ramakrishna, who is greater than the greatest and the Truth that can be known through Om (the *praṇava*). She is the goal of (my life) and the fruit of (my efforts, namely,) *mukti* or liberation (from transmigratory existence).

रमा त्वमेवासि शिवा च वाणी
दासोऽस्मि नित्यं भवरोगयुक्तः।
देवात्मशक्तेर्जगदुद्वायाः
श्रीसारदायाश्चरणौ प्रपद्ये॥

I take refuge at the feet of Sri Sarada Devi who is the soul-power of God, responsible for the creation of the world. (O Mother Sarada!) you are Ramā (Lakṣmī), Śivā (Pārvatī) and Vāṇī (Sarasvatī). I, who am afflicted with the illness of samsara (bondage of birth and death), am your eternal slave.

व्यैकारयुक्तं परमं च मन्त्रं
नवैश्व वर्णैर्घटितं पठेद्यः।
मोहात्प्रमुच्येत नरः स यस्याः
श्रीसारदायाश्चरणौ प्रपद्ये॥

I take refuge at the feet of Sri Sarada Devi by repeating whose supreme, nine-lettered mantra, *Om śrī-sāradā-devyai-namah*, which contains the letter *vyai*, a human being is freed from all delusion.



Chinese Buddhism and Vedanta - II

DR ALAN HUNTER

(continued from the previous issue)

Chan master Han Shan, born in 1546, left home at the age of twelve to become a monk. Han Shan's monastery was destroyed in a fire, and the young monk had a heartfelt wish to rebuild it; but he realized that he could not do so before his own enlightenment, since he should not ask for donations until he had proved it was for a worthy cause. Han Shan lived as a hermit for many years. He reported that when he entered meditation his body and mind disappeared completely and were replaced by a vast brightness like a round mirror wherein his surroundings were reflected. He wrote a famous commentary on the *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra* (Diamond Sutra) which is used by the Chan school for doctrinal teaching. Han Shan interprets the sutra thus: as soon as a doubt or question arose in the Buddha's interlocutor Subhuti's mind, the Buddha, who knew it perfectly, gave an immediate reply without waiting for it to be expressed in words. Therefore, all these mental questions were not recorded, which makes the sutra confusing to readers who do not understand that the Buddha began by wiping out Subhuti's gross misconceptions and ended with destroying his subtlest ideas, eliminating his wrong views one by one until his true nature was revealed. Han Shan shows that first one must rid oneself of gross or coarse errors, then move on to deal with subtle views that are imperceptible except to an enlightened teacher.

Han Shan, like many other Chinese masters, was no sectarian, and wrote a commentary also on the *Prajnaparamita-hridaya Sutra* (Heart Sutra) which teaches the great Buddhist mantra 'gate, gate, paragate, parasangate bodhi swaha'. Mantra repetition may at first

sight appear incompatible with Chan practice, but Han Shan maintained:

What is called Mantra is not a different and separate thing but just this Prajna [wisdom]. It has already been called Prajna, why is it also called Mantra? This is only to show the speed of its supernatural efficacy, like a secret order in the army which can assure victory if it is silently executed. Prajna can break up the army of demons in the world, and is likened to nectar which enables the drinker to obtain immortality. Those who taste Prajna can dispel the greatest disaster caused by birth and death. Therefore the Buddha said: 'It can eliminate all suffering.'¹

Pure Land

Of the various schools of Chinese Buddhism, Pure Land is perhaps the least understood in the West. To the untutored observer, it may appear superstitious, over-emotional, idolatrous, mind-numbing: two of its key practices are repetition of a mantra, sometimes for tens of thousands of times daily, and prostration before images of the Buddha. Much of the early information that came to the West about the school was provided by Christian missionaries, who were indeed untutored in the practices of Buddhism. Pure Land also typified the backward appearance of traditional religious practices for Chinese modernizers, and the image of a pious but stupid old woman muttering a mantra be-

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1. Han Shan, 'The Diamond Cutter of Doubts' and 'A Straight Talk on the Heart Sutra' in *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, ed. Lu K'uan Yu (London: Rider, 1960), Vol. 1, pp. 149-224; citation at p. 219.

came a kind of stereotype of the need for reform.

Pure Land is probably the largest school of Buddhism in East Asia, with perhaps one hundred million adherents in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere. For most of them Pure Land indeed provides a simple, devotional faith. They are taught that instead of striving to achieve enlightenment through meditation, for ordinary folk it will be better first to follow ethical rules of conduct: to avoid stealing, killing, lying and slander, illicit sexual activity, abuse of drugs and so on; and second to seek to attain the 'Pure Land' (Sanskrit *Sukhavati*; Chinese *Jingtu*) after death, by constant repetition of the name of the Buddha (usually in the form of the Bodhisattva Amitabha), prayer to icons of the Buddha, pilgrimages to holy sites and so on. Many believers may be only occasional practitioners. Loosely based on Pali and Sanskrit texts translated into Chinese, and also on texts composed in China itself, Pure Land is essentially an East Asian development of Buddhism.

However, monks of the school are adamant that within this popular tradition—which has its own value—is a profound development of Buddhist thought. In East Asian Buddhism there is considerable debate about the concepts of 'self-power' (Chinese *zili*, Japanese *jiriki*) and 'other-power' (Chinese *tali*, Japanese *tariki*). Self-power is stressed in Chan: progress towards enlightenment is made through intense and sustained personal effort. Other-power is stressed by Pure Land (and by some esoteric schools which we examine later): progress is possible only through the grace of the Buddha, which is invoked by mantras and other techniques. Thus Pure Land argues that its simple practices—emphasis on faith, salvation to heaven rather than illumination, masses for dead, rich iconography—are only superficially for the common people; at a deeper level they are a form of training for the true purpose of Pure Land, namely purifica-

tion of the mind and karma. The real end of Pure Land is complete illumination. Indeed, Pure Land practitioners may point to the great number of enlightened monks in their tradition and claim that while other schools may appear more intellectual or more 'serious', many of the greatest saints have risen from the devotional environment.

The monk Yin Kuang (1861-1940) was a modern Chinese Pure Land master. Some of his letters to devotees survive, and form an excellent commentary on Pure Land in practice.

Pure Land is precisely the sublime method enabling the practitioner to turn his back on worldly dust to merge with Enlightenment and return to the source (the Mind). Laymen bound up in mundane affairs cannot easily find the time to attend retreats, practise meditation, and recite the sutras. This method is therefore very suitable for persons such as yourself. Each one can pay respect to the Buddhas and recite sutras or Buddha Amitabha's name according to individual circumstances and capacities.... You should practice Buddha recitation when walking or standing, reclining or sitting, speaking or remaining silent, eating or dressing, throughout the day, wherever you may be.²

Master Yin Kuang stated explicitly: 'Relying on self-power alone, you cannot escape the cycle of rebirth as long as you still have even a trace of karmic delusion at the time of death—not to mention if you have a great deal.'³

To Yin Kuang, the difference between Pure Land and Zen was essentially a question of appropriate teaching, known in Buddhism as *upaya* [expedient means]: the lesson should be adapted to the level of the student. D.T. Suzuki, the great scholar of Japanese Zen,

2. Yin Kuang, *Pure Land Zen*, trans. Master Thiech Thien Tam (Singapore: Amitabha Buddhist Society, 1993).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

refers to the simile given by the Buddha, 'that the same water drunk by the cow and the cobra turns in one case into nourishing milk and in the other into deadly poison, and that medicine is to be given according to the disease. This is called the doctrine of [expedient] means.'⁴ Yin Kuang told a younger teacher that if he administered the wrong remedy through failure to examine a student's level, he would be no different from an incompetent physician who kills his patient with the wrong medicine. He warned against teaching rigorous forms of introspection, such as meditation on 'Who am I?', to those who are not well prepared; instead, they should be taught ethical conduct and recitation of the Buddha's name.⁵

Another Pure Land practitioner explains further:

He who possesses a good stock of merit is still required to do the work of reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha. This is to prevent divergence from the right path...it is necessary to repose his mind on the name of the great Saviour. Therefore a deep impression of the Pure Land should be made by meditating on the Buddha or repeating His Name, whose power saves one from falling into the wrong ways of re-birth. The power and virtue of the Buddha are as vast as the ocean, while the power of earthy beings in comparison to Him is

very weak. But if one's aspiration is joined to the Buddha's Glory it is like a drop of water which is embodied in the sea and is thus sufficient to stand against any stream.... Adoration of Buddha Amitabha is a shorter and easier way than that of self-struggling with difficulties amid the sea of pain and sorrows, to cross over to the other shore of Buddha-land.⁶

Three practices for serious lay devotees are the repetition of a name of the Buddha (Amitabha), the repetition of a mantra passed on within the tradition, and visualizations. One sequence of visualizations is given as contemplation of 1. the setting sun; 2. pure water; 3. the earth; 4. precious trees; 5. gem-like pools with lotuses; 6. a realm of bliss comprising the above elements; 7. a shining lotus seat; 8. images of three holy ones (ie, the inner essence of the incarnation of the Buddha; the Buddha in human form; the Buddha as perfection of universal intelligence); 9. the bodily form of the Buddha; 10. the Buddha as incarnation of compassion; 11. the Buddha as incarnation of infinite light; 12. the Buddha's realm of bliss.⁷

(to be continued)

4. D.T. Suzuki, *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 121.

5. Yin Kuang, op. cit., p. 84.

6. *An Outline of the Pure Land Doctrine (Aparinī-tayur Sutra; Amitayur Dhyana Sutra; Sukhavati Vyūha)* trans. and ed. Upasika Chihmann (P.C. Lee), (Singapore: Amitabha Buddhist Society, no date), pp. 11-3.

7. See Lu, *Chinese Meditation*, Chapter Three: 'Self-cultivation According to the Pure Land School'.

Who is a Superior Person?

The superior man attends to the spiritual things and not to his livelihood. Yet let him cultivate a farm, and he will be starved, but if you let him attend to his studies, he will find riches in it. The superior man does not worry about his poverty, but worries about the spiritual things.

—Confucius, quoted in *The Wisdom of China*

The Meeting of Nivedita with Holy Mother

PRAVRAJIKAJA AJAYAPRANA

Pravrajika Ajayaprana, a senior nun of the Sarada Math, is the leader of its branch in Australia. What follows is a sparsely edited version of her talk at the recently held centenary celebrations of the Nivedita School, Calcutta.

The meeting of Sister Nivedita with Holy Mother is a very significant event, pregnant with meaning. Who were these personalities whose coming together deserves such thought and analysis that even after a century we believe that it has great significance to the ways of thinking, living and behaviour of today's world, specially of women?

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was what Teilhard de Chardin philosophically states about human beings in general: 'Not a human being having a spiritual experience, but a spiritual being having a human experience.' To use the words of the Jesuit philosopher Marcilio Ficino, 'the Unchanging, a Single Stillness.'

Holy Mother's life was the true practical demonstration of the principles and disciplines followed by monks and nuns, ie, austerity, self-abnegation, ability to adjust to inconveniences, living with no privacy, and smiling or being cheerful even when nothing goes right or according to one's taste. Are not these traits and practices sufficiently great to make our lives and activities interesting and meaningful? Nancy Pope Myorga gives us a wonderful picture of the First Cause:

. In his later years, Einstein, pondering upon the expansion of the universe, made claim that although the universe is running away from us at tremendous speed, it will also return at great speed, contracting. I believe that if we are then conscious, we will ultimately know that point where matter melts into spirit, where science

melts into religion and religion is swallowed up in the First Cause.¹

The First Cause, the ultimate Principle, the Still Point, the 'Point of Singularity' to use the terminology of modern science—on that was Holy Mother living, ever stationed and poised in perfect equilibrium. That was a point where infinity and eternity coalesce into one homogeneous entity. Our duty is to tap that energy, get close to that universal heart, become enlivened, rejuvenated, and thus be ready to plunge into life's whirlpool with renewed zest and vigour.

Sister Nivedita did just that. She has shown us through her meeting with the great Mother and through her observations and actions, as to how we should launch this scheme and work it out. What about Nivedita? How could Nivedita, a product of the most dominating power in the world of that time, the British Empire, become the beacon light, inspiration and trailblazer for today's world, more so for the women of the next millennium? Ebullient, energetic, beaming with fresh and novel ideas about education and social service, fired with zeal, inspiration and vision, Miss Margaret Noble was dedicated to spiritual ideas from early in life. Her intellect was keen and clear, sharpened by clashing and crossing swords with some of the greatest intellectuals of the day, like George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Huxley, and others on the battlefield of the debating societies of the Sesame Club in London. The Irish

1. Nancy Pope Myorga, *Hunger of the Soul*, p. 9.

lady, after coming into contact with her master, Swami Vivekananda, was chastened, chiselled and modelled into 'the dedicated'—*niveditā*—ready to be offered at the altar of universal Energy.

The meeting between Holy Mother and Nivedita—or rather, was it not a communion?—was not between two women hailing from the two ends of the earth; neither was it between the ancient and the modern; nor was it between spirituality and materialism. What was it then? It was a communion between the infinite, eternal, universal heart and the individual heart pulsating within each one of us. Language was no barrier in this communication, where heart spoke to heart. Difference in caste, class, culture, country, or colour could not place any obstruction in the path of the free flow of unsolicited universal love and energy into the heart of the expectant and fully-prepared recipient.

The resultant effect was a wonderful and beautiful experience, a legacy the young lady has left for us in edifying and inspiring words: ...I ought to tell you about the lady who was the wife of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada as her name is. To begin with, she is dressed in a white cotton cloth like any other Hindu widow under 50. This cloth goes round the waist and forms a skirt, then it passes round the body and over the head like a nun's veil. When a man speaks to her, he stands behind her, and she pulls this white veil very far forward over her face. Nor does she answer him directly. She speaks to another and older woman in almost a whisper, and this woman repeats her words to the man. In this way it comes about that the Master [Vivekananda] has never seen the face of Sarada! Added to this, you must try to imagine her always seated on the floor, on a small piece of bamboo matting. ...yet this woman, when you know her well, is said to be the very soul of practicality and common-sense, as

she certainly gives every token of being, to those who know her slightly. Sri Ramakrishna always consulted her before undertaking anything and her advice always acted upon by his disciples. She is the very soul of sweetness—so gentle and loving and as merry as a girl....

Then you should see the chivalrous feeling that the monks have for her. They always call her 'Mother' and speak of her as 'The Holy Mother'—and she is literally their first thought in every emergency. There are always one or two in attendance on her, and whatever her wish is, it is their command. It is a wonderful relationship to watch.²

Swami Nikhilananda, a disciple of Holy Mother, adds more beauty and prestige to this presentation in his biography:

Her simple words often revealed her deep intuition, refinement, and inborn culture though she had no academic education whatever.... When the war [the First World War] was going on, with its accompanying cruelty, violence, and death, a disciple asked the Mother how one could reconcile such wanton destruction with the advent of a God-man like Sri Ramakrishna, a messenger of peace. She replied, 'A God-man first uses a broomstick to remove the rubbish and dust accumulated through the ages and then soothes the world by pouring nectar from the pitcher of peace.'³

The Swami says, Sister Nivedita wrote these vivid words about Holy Mother: 'In her one sees realized that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may attain. And

2. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1982), Vol. 1, pp. 9-10.

3. Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), p. 236.

yet to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her saintliness. I have never known her hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgement, however new and complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer. Her whole experience is of the theocratic civilization. Yet she rises to the height of every situation.... Does one carry some perplexity beyond her? With unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter, and sets the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty.⁴

The Swami observes: 'Nivedita observed in her an "instant power to penetrate a new religious feeling or idea."⁵ Is she not modern in every sense of the term? Is Holy Mother not the best ideal and exemplary model for today's woman who is trying to find her correct place in life, in society, in humanity as a whole? We remember William Blake's words, 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, man would see everything as it is, infinite.'

In this age of blatant ostentatiousness and public display of one's physical prowess, of bodily loveliness, and of the arrogance stemming from power, money, exploitation, self-promotion and so on, do we not hear the distant silent echoes of Holy Mother's voice, filled with tenderness, asking us to pause, listen, look around, reassess our situation, and therefrom revitalize ourselves to become better, greater and stronger? The impulsive, tempestuous, highly emotional young Irish spirit in Miss Noble heard it and promptly

responded. And so should we. Nivedita represents truly and fully the natural temperament in each one of us, especially the woman of the current age, not only of the West but also of the East, who is blindly aping everything the black sheep do.

It needed a Miss Noble from the far-off British Isles to detect and point out to us through example the uniqueness of this great power. I do not think any other woman, from Europe or America or even India, had the keenness to penetrate through the veil and get connected to the silent dynamo that Holy Mother was, as Nivedita did.

Today, there is a dire need of arousing within us Nivedita's exuberant, enthusiastic ardour, zeal and the spirit of the thunderbolt which exclaimed in exasperation to the slow-moving Indians that she had had enough of 'words, words, words,' and she wanted them to 'work, work and work.' For the great benediction to pour down unstintedly from the cosmic Heart and thereby be revitalized and reformed into full-fledged, active, efficient, self-sacrificing, successful personalities, the people of today, especially women, have to equip themselves with all the qualities of truth, unselfishness, purity, service-mindedness and a spiritual outlook. Women, unfortunately, have the habit of complaining and putting the blame on men and society in general for all the inequities and so-called inequalities that they are exposed to. We have to stop it at once. Invoking the grace and power of the Mother let us shake off our self-pity and plunge into action. □

4. Ibid., p. 237.

5. Ibid., p. 236.

If you want peace of mind, give up fault-finding. ... Learn to accept everyone as your own. No one is alien to you, the whole world is yours.

—Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi

RELIGION AND LIFE

Swami Bhuteshanandaji's Answers to Questions

The questions and answers being serialized in these columns are not meant to be scholarly expositions of various issues. People from different walks of life used to meet Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj daily during his tenure as President of the Ramakrishna Order, and discuss with him their problems and doubts; and Revered Maharaj would clear their doubts in a characteristically simple way. These questions and answers were recorded and read out to him before he approved them all for publication.

Maharaj, who is a real guru?

The real guru is eternal. A real spiritual teacher is absolutely pure, has a pure mind, and is none other than the supreme Brahman. He is there to impart spiritual knowledge—we learn spiritual knowledge from him and know about the ways to see the Divine. Those who become gurus for business' sake are not the true ones.

Maharaj, is everything possible through guru's mercy?

The one individual in whom we can fearlessly seek refuge, and repeatedly beg for grace, is the spiritual teacher. The human guru is the image of God. Who can say how much each one will receive from Him? It all depends on your intensity of aspiration and devotion. But remember, you too should struggle hard; simply depending upon the human guru will not do. Just clinging to the human guru will not help you. You should follow his teachings, and then alone will guru's mercy be understood.

In the *Gītā* (4.34) it is said that the eligibility for the supreme knowledge of Brahman can be had by humility, reverential questioning and devoted service:

*Tad-viddhi praṇipātena
paripraśnena sevayā;
Upadekṣyanti te jñānam
jñāninas-tattva-darśinaḥ.*

What is guru's mercy?

The guru uplifts the disciple from misery and suffering—that is the significance of guru's mercy. The guru helps the aspirant in every way when the latter approaches him with earnestness to know about spiritual life. However, in so doing, the guru does not have any ulterior motive. It is out of compassion that he helps the aspirant.

Maharaj, what is the necessity of guru's company?

Guru is the guide. He guides the aspirant who yearns for God along the right path. Sri Ramakrishna has said that to learn about the quality of yarn, you will have to live with the weaver for some time. Once you acquire experience in this, you will put your experience to good use. If you see the guru full of purity, compassion and love, you will have some idea of the glory of purity and a holy life. How else can you know that?

Should we look upon the guru as the embodiment of Īśvara?

You see, your attitude is directly proportional to your gain and progress. Banaras is Shiva itself. Sri Ramakrishna saw Shiva as permeating everything in Banaras. But because of our blinkered attitude, He appears to be localized in one particular place only—and that too not at all clearly. To a *jñāni* or a *bhakta*, however, God is visible everywhere and in everything. What I mean is this: to look upon the guru as an embodiment of God is all a

matter of your inner feeling and maturity.

Maharaj, does holy company mean keeping guru's company?

In one sense that may be so. Contact with a holy person will remind us of the importance of God in life. Keep such company and then only you will realize its worth. A holy person is one who is travelling along the path to God—he is an ardent seeker. He has seen enough of this world which we hold on to with all our might. If conversing with such a seeker reminds you of God, reminds you of the real purpose of your life, then the person is really holy. Holy company does not imply keeping in touch with a well-known organization. Maintaining close touch with a holy person and to follow his ideals is the essence of holy company.

We see that this universe, our dreams, even our deep sleep experience—nothing is lasting. How then can we perceive our guru or Iṣṭa in our hearts permanently?

Whatever we experience is a *vṛtti* revealed to us by our mind. Without the mind nothing is possible. Our mind has its own limitations; first of all it is not pure. As a result, whatever is perceived through it will not be complete or perfect. This imperfection also applies to our perception of the guru, who is really the *Iṣṭa* in another form. Hence purification of mind is necessary. The clearer the mirror, the brighter the reflection. Similarly, the more refined the mind, the truer the manifestation. Reflections dance to the movement of water in a pond; owing to ripples in it, the images are not clearly visible. A clear image is seen only when the water is still and clean. Again, the reflection in water is never as clear as that in a mirror because of the ascription of water on what is being revealed. That is why Sri Ramakrishna said that pure mind, pure intellect and pure Atman are one and the same. That which manifests objects truly is the intellect. Once the mind is pure, the *buddhi* attains purity, resulting in the perception of oneself as pure Atman. Just as a

fully transparent glass does not offer any resistance to the passage of light rays, so also the totally purified mind finds no obstructions to display itself as pure *buddhi*, and then it is nothing but the true manifestation of the Atman.

All that we see around us is the Atman alone but we fail to perceive it owing to the presence of impurities in us. When the mind attains purity, the distinction between oneself and the Self, and the seer and the seen, ceases. Once the mind is pure, the true identity of external objects will be laid bare and we will be able to see the Self alone. It is like the distinction between you and your portrait—the seer is seeing the seen. What accounts for such a distinction? The distinction is substantiated by the fact that you, the seer, is seeing the portrait, the seen. The two have separate identities. But once the mind is purified, the seer and the seen lose their separate identity, both merging into one; both are your Self alone.

Reference to this is in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (3.1.1):

*Dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhyā
samānam vṛkṣam pariśvasjāte;
Tayor-anyah pippalam svādv-atty-
anaśnann-anyo'bhicākaṣīti.*

Two birds dwell in the same tree. One eats the sweet or sour fruits and experiences happiness or sorrow accordingly. This bird sees the other at a higher perch, witnessing everything with delight but without tasting any fruit. The lower bird wants to know the reason for the other bird's delight and hops up slowly, and when it reaches the other bird, the two merge together and become one. The two birds were not different so as to become one later; they were indeed one. In the tree called the human body, there are two birds: one is the individual self (*jīvātman*) and the other, the supreme Self (*paramātman*). The union of the two or the knowledge of their oneness is the goal.

—Compiled by Smt Manju Nandi Mazumdar

Obstacles to Spiritual Growth

PRAVRAJIKA PRABUDDHAMATA

Pravrajika Prabuddhamata from Calcutta gives a brief account of the obstacles spiritual aspirants have to face in their pursuit, alluding to the obstacles (antarāyas) of Yoga.

The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (3.1.1,2) gives a beautiful description of two birds sitting on a tree—one on a higher branch and the other, lower. The lower bird cravingly stares at the higher bird—eager to enjoy the same serenity and bliss that the bird is enjoying—and very slowly, attempts to reach it. However, the sweet and bitter fruits keep the lower bird's mind engaged and make it forget its desire to rise up. The birds, taken as representing the *paramātmān* and the *jīvātman* respectively, bear a fascinating semblance. The former is the symbol of eternal peace and supreme bliss, while the latter typifies the pleasure-seeking but failing, and pain-avoiding but suffering, soul. In course of time, being disgusted with the monotony of tasting bitter-sweet fruits, the lower bird hops up. When the two meet, the lower bird finds that the two were but one and the same; and the finite merges into the Absolute—the *jīvātman* finds that it is nothing but the *paramātmān*.

It appears that the lower bird's reaching the higher one is not at all difficult: they are so near. However, the attraction of fruits all around repeatedly stops the bird from going up; and to give up the desire for these fruits requires untiring endeavour on part of the struggling bird. So is the case with us.

A Himalayan barrier seems to exist between God and us, though the supreme Being is only seconds away from us, to speak in ordinary parlance. We all hear that everything is Brahman alone, or that the supreme Being is in our hearts. Yet, to know the ultimate Truth, or to reach the supreme Being, is so difficult. So the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.3.14) compares the path leading to the Divine to the

sharp edge of a sword (*kṣurasya dhārā*). To reach the Absolute is as difficult as it is to walk on the sharp edge of a blade. What is the reason? Even though God is so very near, why is it that we cannot attain Him?

The world and its multifarious enjoyments are so attractive to the ignorant soul that, as the *Gītā* (7.3) says, of the thousands trying to reach God, only one or two attain success. The individual soul (*jīva*) is more comfortable with the blows and sufferings that the world gives it constantly than with the unseen God. Though the world is wrought with pain and misery alone, the soul hungers to draw some pleasure and happiness out of it. There is only disappointment awaiting all such endeavours; but still it never learns lessons. The soul seems to ask, 'Why shall I try to attain the highest ideal, which is unknown, hard to attain, and beset with tremendous troubles and obstacles? What do I gain by attaining that?'

The world has been blessed, from time to time, by the advent of great men and women who do not care for anything that the world offers, but like the river that rushes to mingle with the ocean, go straight to God. Their lives and words are the sources of inspiration to humanity. Their struggle, power of endurance, tenacity, methods of overcoming endless obstacles, achievements, and joy of success—all these inspire humanity, tired of the world's false allurements and blows, to know the reality behind all this falsehood. Life after life of coming and going, suffering and weeping, seeking joy in vanity and failing, will make many of us understand that this is all false. There is something real behind

all this, and that reality is the goal of life.

Most aspirants, though desirous to know the Truth, are not favoured with success. There are various stages where we stop, and give up. We are not equipped with the desire, the eagerness, the yearning to reach the goal, as it is only a blow or two from the world that has made us seek the Truth. This is one reason. The other reason is that the obstacles we face on the way unnerve us thoroughly. We succumb to their enticements and give up our fight.

Speaking about enticements, the world is a fountainhead of temptation: it offers so many allurements to delude us. The very first requisite to swim against the current, to fight falsehood and attain the Truth, is renunciation. Detachment and renunciation are absolutely necessary if we are to shake off the shackles of deception. Of the great ones who have succeeded in this big battle, it is said in the Upanishads that 'they give up the desire for progeny, wealth, name and fame, and everything else, and become mendicants.'¹ Not all are to be mendicants (or monastics) of course, though mentally we all should cultivate the spirit of renunciation if at all we aspire after the highest. The Upanishad above speaks of progeny, wealth and fame because these three—*kāma*, *kāñcana* and also *kīrti*—are the biggest hurdles to spiritual growth. It is these that hold us down to the world and make us suffer endlessly. The attraction of the world which is making millions of people foolish is nothing but the attraction of these three. So, the wise, who have understood the emptiness of it all, should give them up, at least mentally.

Certain positive virtues are also to be cultivated in order to grow spiritually. They are: faith in God, fearlessness, patience, purity, power of discrimination, and so on. These are like sheaths that protect us from the

fierce onslaught of the world. Even as soldiers are equipped with sufficient gear to combat the enemy, we should be well armed to protect ourselves from unforeseen attacks of the world. There is one important point to note here. The world is not somewhere outside us—it is inside. The mind is the world. An illumined person and a bound one both look at the world, but each one senses it differently. So, the mind is everything. Having been with the objects of enjoyment for years, the mind is naturally attracted to them as they appear to bring happiness. It is for the aspirant to convince it and make it strong. As Sri Ramakrishna says, both bondage and liberation are in the mind only. The aspirant has therefore to fortify his mind and strengthen it against falling. There is no knowing at all in how many disguises the world comes to the Truth-seeker to lure him. The great teacher of Yoga, Patanjali, has listed out such deterrents (*antarāyas*)—other than ignorance (*avidyā*), egoism (*asmitā*), attachment (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*) and clinging to life (*abhiniveśa*)—which block the aspirant's way (see *Yoga Sūtras*, 1.30). These are:

1. Sickness (*vyādhi*): Bodily sickness is a hindrance to spiritual progress. A sick person is generally unfit to undergo severe spiritual disciplines. So the body needs to be taken care of. A well-balanced diet and regulated life can keep many ailments away. One of the reasons for bodily ailments is karmic—the consequences of past actions. A spiritual aspirant should take to any of the known means—like selfless service, prayer, self-surrender, etc—to overcome the influences of karma. As the mind becomes pure, the body becomes a positive aid to spiritual growth.

2. Languor (*styāna*): Restlessness of mind makes the aspirant not want to meditate or follow spiritual disciplines. A disciplined life and strong will are the ways to control such a mind.

3. Doubt (*saṁśaya*): Doubt is one of the great enemies of a Truth-seeker. Even though there may be a thousand cases of glorious

1. *Te ha sma putraīṣaṇāyāśca vittaīṣaṇāyāśca lokaīṣaṇāyāśca vyutthāya atha bhikṣācaryam caranti.* —*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.4.22.

achievement before him or her, the aspirant feels that perhaps all that might be false; that this world itself might be the real one. Discrimination, company of the holy, repeated hearing and deep thinking, and prayer are methods given to overcome this menace.

4. Heedlessness (*pramāda*): Heedlessness is an obstacle which is caused by the mind's inability to discriminate between right and wrong. The mind tends to make mistakes. The solution to this is to engage the mind always—either in contemplation or work or prayer. This requires strength, and strength comes from repeated effort as well as God's grace.

5. Laziness (*ālasya*): Laziness causes mental and physical inactivity. Avoiding overeating and practising moderation in every way is the process of overcoming laziness. A well-disciplined life of balanced diet and sleep, and a strict routine, will enable the aspirant to overcome this obstacle. A sincere aspirant is very careful about what he eats and does.

6. Worldliness (*avirati*): Here, worldliness means enduring attachment to the objects of the world. Without knowing properly what things are to be given up (*hāna*) and how to give them up (*hānopāya*), a spiritual seeker sometimes neglects his greatest ideal and essential duties, while welcoming trifling and non-essential ones. This is due to want of clear conception and insight. There are certain weak moments when a near and dear one, for instance, monopolizes the aspirant's mind thoroughly. An uncompromising dispassion is what is essential to overcome this hurdle. There need not be hatred towards anyone, but detachment and compassion are what are considered the right attitudes.

7. Erroneous Perception (*bhrānti darśana*): This is a subtle barricade. Having been blessed with some supersensuous glimpses or visions, or ecstatic states, an aspirant may presume that he has reached the cherished goal. Proper guidance is needed at such times. The mind of the sincere aspirant

is itself the best guide. However, constant reflection, meditation on saints' lives and words, seeking holy company, and such other methods will help him. The Upanishads glorify faith in the guru and God in equal measure: 'He who has supreme devotion to God; and the same type of devotion to the guru will have spiritual treasures opened for him.'²

Patanjali mentions other higher obstacles like failure to attain certain states of samadhi called *madhumatī*. This is called *alabdha-bhūmikatva*. Though this is a higher obstacle, the reason given for this is that the mind is still not purged completely of desires, and so the highest state of realization remains beyond grip. The other higher obstacle is *anavasthitatva* or instability in higher samadhi.

From time immemorial, thousands of aspirants have overcome all hurdles and reached the goal. Overcoming all vicissitudes, they have succeeded in obtaining the hidden treasure. This only shows that hurdles are no great problem at all for a sincere and eager aspirant. In fact, these obstacles strengthen the aspirant's desire to go forward. They bring maturity to his character. Rivers force themselves forward when they find obstacles, and the current, too, becomes stronger. As obstacles increase, an obstinate mind centres around itself utmost power and strength to overcome them. Devotees consider stumbling-blocks to be tests by the loving Lord. And these aspirants feel an ocean of compassion and grace awaiting their arrival. After all the struggle of climbing the mountain comes the everlasting joy of reaching the summit—there is only beatitude then. All troubles and difficulties are forgotten when the soul discovers its supremeness. When the lower bird reaches the higher one, it discovers that the two are one and there is only eternal bliss henceforth! □

2. *Yasya deve parābhaktir-
yathā deve tathā gurau;
Tasyaite kathitā hyarthaḥ
prakāśante mahātmanah.*

—*Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 6.23.

The Ganga

PROF B. N. SIKDAR

Our readers are familiar with Prof Sikdar's scholarly articles. Here, he follows the Ganga's downward flow from its source to explain the significance of this most sacred river.

Sri Sankara has composed a stirring hymn to the Ganga. It is simply worded, easily memorized, and eloquently musical. The opening verse uses three synonyms—*devī*, *sureśvarī*, *bhagavatī*—to emphasize the divine quality of the river. In doing so, the poet must have borne in mind what a more ancient saint thought of her. Valmiki in his *Gangāṣṭaka* (Eight Verses in Praise of Ganga) said that her waters could, and did, save sinful souls from damnation. Among the other attributes ascribed to this river are: her power to confer bliss, prosperity, and immortality; to prevent rebirth, secure immunity to sickness of both body and mind; and fulfill all righteous desires. Ages later, a Bengali Nobel laureate sang that the river was surely molten compassion.¹ All three were enchanted by her watery effulgence resembling the gleam of pearls, moonlight, and pristine snow. Ganga, then, is no river. She is a reviver of both body and soul—in life as in death.

The Indo-Aryans were rather late historically in appreciating the Ganga's beauty and holiness. Their original settlements were in the north-western parts of India, and hence did not have a direct acquaintance with our river to begin with. In the *Ṛg Veda* Ganga is mentioned only once, and that too in passing. In the Brahmanas which adopt aetiological myths to present concrete facts, people inhabiting the region between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna (now called Doab) are credited with

profound piety.³ From about these times onward religious as well as secular treatises and epigraphs stress Ganga's sacredness. Until they had come to and settled by the Ganga the Indo-Aryans do not appear to have effected much change in their life-style. It is on her banks that they became agriculturists.

The Puranas say a lot in different forms about this river's appearance in Asia's atlas. According to one version (the most popular and interesting) a prince-ascetic had to perform penances for ages. That was Bhagiratha. His ancestors had sinned and their ashes lay scattered over a wide area in the nethermost regions of what are now West Bengal and Bangladesh. The lost souls could not gain salvation unless the sacred Ganga washed their ashes clean. The long, arduous spiritual labours of Bhagiratha pleased the goddess Ganga to consent to leave her heavenly abode. There was another problem: where was the spot firm enough to stand the shock of her cascading torrents? The choice could not but be one of the sublime peaks of the majestic Himalayas. Mount Kailas (off Manasarovar) resembles a huge human head, with icicles hanging like a yogi's matted locks in pre-dawn starlight. Puranic imagination made the peak Lord Siva's head. Bhagiratha now did more penance, and Siva received the torrents rushing down from the skies.

All great rivers of the world have legends woven round their origin. Let me cite

1. *Jālnabi jamunā bigalita karuṇā* —Rabindranath Tagore.

2. *Ṛg Veda*, 'Nadistuti', 10.75.5.

3. Cf. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 13.5.4.11.

two: Christ Juba II, King of Mauretania (in north-west Africa) is said to have made the Nile rise in a spot not far from the Atlantic; the Mississippi and the Amazon, thought the ancient Greeks, sprang from Nereids. At the time these legends were spun, the earth was pollution-free, the sun and moon brighter, the stars more sparkling, and the forests more extensive, shadowy and deep.

The scriptures also say that the huge volume of water divided itself into seven channels. Towards the west flowed Hladini, Pavani and Nalini; to the east ran Suchakshu, Sita and Sindhu. A seventh portion followed Bhagiratha south-east.⁴ This descent of the holy waters provided a grand spectacle, so much so that saints, Yakshas, Gandharvas, Devas and Devis, all thronged to the spot. Here, say the verses, the current ran swiftly; here crookedly, here broadly; there narrow and constricted; there smoothly murmuring.

Legends are ever fascinating, but they are not all fancy. In most of these a touch of scientific truth lies buried. The signification of the Ganga's birth-story lies, perhaps, in the fact that as snow fell—and fell on the Himalayan peak—glaciers were formed which melted as they crept down the snowline, and forcing through the infinite complexity of Himalayan terrain touched Haridwar.

What the first pilgrims and later tourists observed was water sallying forth from a rocky aperture, which once resembled a bovine head. Hence, over the ages this source has been described as Gomukh (*go* = cow; *mukha* = mouth).⁵ The panorama is breathtaking in sublimity as well as in its terrifying aspect. Winds shriek; the cold is raw and biting to the bone; the snow is (or was) spotless; the peaks far and near are masked in mists. The young, swiftly flowing stream, tumbling over strewn rocks (*khaṇḍita girivara maṇḍita bhange*), sculpted boulders, through

woodlands of honeysuckle, wild, crimson rhododendrons, is joined by the Alakananda at Devaprayag, Rishikesh (now a town 365 metres above sea level). Here another tributary—the Chandrabhaga—flows into the Ganga. Seventy three metres below Haridwar, full of temples and monasteries, is one of the four holiest spots in the sub-continent where, every twelve years, a fair (the Kumbha Mela) is held. Some of the sacred parts of Haridwar town are Har-ki-Pairie, with a footprint of Hari, Saptarishi Ashram and Sapta Sarovar.

Henceforth flat-bottomed, the Ganga's journey is smooth and sedate. At Bulandshahr she takes a south-easterly course until Varanasi, where for about six kilometres the flow turns directly north and then veers southward again. At Prayag (Allahabad) the Yamuna meets the Ganga: the blue of the first embraces the whitish-brown of the second and they run side by side, clearly demarcated, to finally mingle and merge.

This confluence, too, sees a mighty congregation of monks and the pious lay every twelve years (during the Kumbha Mela). The participants madly rush to take a dip at the appointed hour. Their faith in the healing and cleansing efficacy of the Ganga's waters are unvarying. To such she is indeed the river of life.

When the monsoons arrive, this river of life overflows her banks, spreads inland, and submerges villages and fields, depositing fertility in the form of silt. At places, in the rainy season, she is as broad as 10 km (eg, at the confluence of the Meghna, Brahmaputra and Ganga in Bangladesh). Fishermen fish—the most precious gift is the silvery *hilsa*, a rare delicacy for the people of lower Ganga—bathers dip, boys dive, swim and

4. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 'Bāla Kāṇḍa', Verse 42.

5. Over the years, earthquake and other geological causes have distorted this aperture's shape.

splash, housewives wash their pots and clothes, fill pitchers to take the water home. It is a wonderful scene: dark clouds pierced by forked lightening, the crash of thunder, and the Ganga heaving as if to kiss the sky. *Bhāti-yāli* songs (folk-songs of pensively sweet, soft tunes) by boatmen on the river soothe sad hearts. Among clusters of palm and mangrove squat box-like homes of the poor, with walled courtyards, built with cowdung and the river's silt.

As the Ganga drifts south-east, cutting through the heart of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, fertile valleys roll inland many kilometres. Large green fields of rice, barley or millet nod and sway in the wind. For aquatic animals like the turtle, crocodile, etc, this is the season they most enjoy.

Chafing at the Chotanagpur hills, off Rajmahal, the Ganga enters West Bengal and bends sharply towards the Bay of Bengal. A turbulent, mighty Himalayan outpouring—the Brahmaputra—clasps the placid Ganga. The Meghna too comes to make her wild. This huge volume of water soon afterwards divides and re-divides to fall into the Bay of Bengal in multiple channels. The wilder arm is called the Padma, which was in the not-so-distant past crisscrossed by steamers, launches and barges which carried man, mail and merchandize including jute, jute-products and varieties of fish.

The story of this goddess in river form has not always been uplifting; dark episodes constitute many chapters of her earthly existence. Much water has flown since her banks reverberated with mantras chanted by sages and the pious at dawn and at sunset. These episodes are bloody and horrifying in print even. Wave after wave of invaders came crashing and surging through the Hindu Kush Range, and some of them like the Turks and the Mongols marched ahead until they reached the Yamuna and the Ganga. In towns

on or near this river lay richest treasures of gold, silver, pearls, diamonds, silk and what not. Empires rose and fell; battles were lost and won. Marauders ran amuck, burning, killing, demolishing, pillaging, and indulging in every kind of atrocity that lust and brutality can invoke. On occasion, blood was so copiously shed that literally rivers of blood stained the Ganga's waters; thousands of bloated bodies of human beings and animals floated thickly, drifting to the sea. The grey waters turned crimson. The whole countryside was a vast desert. The silence of a cemetery reigned. The fertility of the river, however, gradually drew people to her shores once again. Ordinary life took over. The ties which bind people to the Ganga can be of many strengths and shades. Faithful farmers lovingly watered and cultivated with hoes and ploughs of wood every square centimetre of the soil enriched by this river of life—a patrimony recognized for ages and ages as unequalled. Death has thus been defied and vanquished time and again.

Regrettably, such an extraordinary inheritance is at serious risk on account of Indians' tragic negligence. A number of towns have blossomed over the ages on or close to the Ganga. These cities pour every month hundreds of tonnes of filth and other pollutants into this life-giving outpouring from the Himalayas; industrialization is spelling the doom of one of Nature's noblest gifts to us. The most offensive are the factories producing synthetic material and antibiotics. About a decade ago, waste from the leather factories of Kanpur killed and poisoned fish to such an extent that a general alert had to be sounded to shun this highly nutritious produce. There being a steady erosion of purity, this goddess of a river can now hardly regenerate us, skeptics feel. 'The pity of it, Iago, the pity of it.'

Ironically, it was the Ganga's reputation for holiness which led to such cruel practices as infanticide in the early centuries, say some.

The British put down this cruel custom firmly and were criticized by the orthodox, it is said. Until recently, half-dead men and women were carried (sometimes at their own request) to the riverside where they were immersed in cold water up to the waist; which made whatever warmth might have been lingering drain away quickly. Less pernicious morally, but more economically, lumps of gold, jewellery, silver, etc are consigned to the Ganga's depths by the affluent; a huge sum (which could be better spent otherwise) is thus lost for ever. To celebrate the Ganga's liberating powers, every year from all over India flock ash-smearing sadhus and the pious to the confluence of the sea and the river off Sagar Island. On the last day of Paus (December-January) at dawn, in biting cold, thousands take a holy dip. The presiding saint here is Kapila Muni, whose wrath is said to have reduced Bhagiratha's ancestors to ashes. Probably, it must have been an outbreak of yellow fever caused by epidemic jaundice, which led to the death of thousands of diggers who worked on a diversion of the river's flow. The story of the Panama Canal too is an example of such devastation in recent times. Yellow fever claimed hundreds of lives there. Actual construction of the canal took as long as seven years, as work was interrupted by the onslaught of yellow fever and malaria.⁶

River Ganga's appeal has ever haunted

pious for millennia. As late as the second half of the 19th century, Swami Vivekananda wrote, 'How many gushing springs and roaring cataracts, how many icy rivulets and ever-flowing streamlets, issuing from the eternal snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, combine and flow together to form the gigantic river of the gods, the Ganga, and rush impetuously towards the ocean!'⁷ This young but wise monk had traversed the rough Himalayan terrain from Darjeeling to Amarnath, and almost died in the attempt. His talks and writings abound in loving references to the sublimity and glory of the Ganga. About a decade ago, Sir Edmund Hillary chose to float down in a small craft from Devaprayag to the Bay of Bengal in his expedition called 'Sky to Sea'. Why? Because the beauty of this river of life and death is inexhaustible, though spoiled by us to a large extent. In this age of dams, too, the river has been doing her heavenly task—watering parched earth far inland, though her holy body itself is shrivelled in the process.

Of all the woes that bedevil human existence, the worst is perhaps frustration: the dichotomy between what one aspired after and what one could achieve. We cannot say we escaped this woe, yet it is our prayer and hope that this goddess of a river cleanses our soul and makes us fit to present ourselves before our Maker. □

6. Cf. entry on 'Panama Canal' in the *Columbian Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 1592.

7. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), Vol. 4, p. 407.

When I prayed with my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvellous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that they existed for man's sake...that everything proved the love of God for man, that all things prayed to God and sang His praise.

—from *The Way of a Pilgrim*

Dedication

As the two ladies walked from the pond towards their houses, the conversation went on in whispers. Ranjana was a tiny village. News had spread like wildfire; and the poor girl's fate was the talk of the village. It was known that one day her husband would go away. Everyone knew that of late, he had become somewhat peculiar. Since childhood he had some 'specialities', but not so alarming as of late. In recent times, he had changed drastically. He had his own odd ways: he would no doubt work but his mind would be somewhere else. The village temple was his home, so to say. His mother tried her utmost to turn her son's mind towards worldly affairs, but in vain. His father scolded him for his angularities on several occasions, but in vain. Village elders tried to convince him not to go into the wilderness at night, but in vain. A fine young man he was, so handsome to look at and so refined. But, lately, God knows what had happened to this otherwise polite and sincere youth!

The usual remedy was suggested. Village wise men said, 'We have seen several such cases. Don't worry. Look for a suitable girl. If he marries, he will be all right.' They were rich and so there was no difficulty. A pious girl was selected. To convince the boy was, of course, a Herculean task. Threatening him with serious consequences, too, failed. Then, some cunning was used, and he was caught. Their plot was consummated. What a pious girl she was! She never sensed anything fishy at all until she came to her father-in-law's house. Everyone cared for her. But, to her astonishment, her husband simply ignored her. She slowly got used to such peculiarities. Her one ideal now was to serve her husband, considering him as God. She would not eat till he ate and this rule played havoc with her health. To force him to eat was a

problem; and to do eat, first of all he had to be brought home.

One evening, he was gone. There was no trace of him. People searched everywhere but returned with no news. The girl would not eat. Her in-laws were greatly troubled. They cursed themselves for having ruined her life. Their only concern now was to make her happy. But how could she be happy? Prayer, prayer, and prayer—that was all she knew. She went on, 'O Lord, kindly show me where my husband is. I don't know if he has eaten anything. I don't know if he has slept. Please protect him.' Her prayers were heard. After days of ordeal, the girl came to know that her husband was living on some far-off hill, immersed in the thoughts of God. The only thought of this poor wife was to go to her husband. She wept and pleaded with her parents-in-law. There were protests initially, both from her relatives and village elders, but they yielded at last.

The lady ran and ran. She climbed up the hill with not a little difficulty. At last, there! Her eyes brightened to see her husband, sitting in meditation, oblivious of the outer world. He looked emaciated. The lady silently waited. After hours, her husband arose from meditation. He appeared shocked: 'You? You have come here? But why? Go, go; go away!' His wife fell at his feet and pleaded repeatedly: 'Please don't ask me to go away, my lord! I shall remain your servant. I shall never for a moment disturb you. I want only this: to be in your proximity.' After hours of heated arguments, he reluctantly yielded but on a condition: she should never disturb him.

His one thought was God and everything else was a hindrance to him. To get rid of her, he began testing her. He said, 'You wish to think of God, and have so many ornaments on...' In an instant, his wife removed

Reviews and Notices

VEDANTA—A SIMPLE INTRODUCTION:
By Pravrajika Vrajaprana. Published by Vedanta Press, 1946 Vedanta Place, Hollywood, California 90068-3996, USA. 1999. Pp. 90. \$4.95.

'Vedanta'—in India this word means different things to different people. But to most people outside of India this word means almost nothing. In India the word 'Vedanta' could mean one of the six systems of Indian philosophy. Or it could refer only to monistic Vedanta as taught by Sankara. But to a follower of Ramanuja or Madhva it would mean qualified monism or dualism. The word could also be used simply to refer to the Upanishads, as etymologically that is what the word means. Vedanta is *Veda+anta*—the end of the Vedas. And the Upanishads are those scriptures which come at the end of the Vedas.

Yet in the West, the word Vedanta has never become 'familiar' the way other Indian religious terms have. 'Yoga', 'karma', 'avatar', 'mantra'—these are now well-known terms all over the world. But 'Vedanta' lags behind. Then why are most of the Ramakrishna Math centres in the West called Vedanta Societies? How does one explain to a Westerner—without putting too much strain on his or her patience—what this word means and why it is used instead of a more familiar word, such as yoga or Hinduism? What is so different about Vedanta that it cannot be called Hinduism or yoga? After all, did not Swami Vivekananda teach the four yogas—of devotion, knowledge, right action, and meditation—when he came to the West?

Nowadays in the West the word 'yoga' has become almost synonymous with *hatha yoga*. Though some Westerners are vaguely aware that the word has other connotations—such as meditation—it is difficult to shake off the mental image of physical exercises and strange bodily contortions that the word has come to invoke. The word 'Hinduism' too stirs up its own mental pictures—of temples, the Ganges, and cute, chubby elephant-faced images. It is hard for the average Westerner to connect that word with a monistic philosophy.

When Swami Vivekananda came to the West, he used the term 'Vedanta' for the religion and philosophy of India, as he felt it was the most suitable term to describe the teachings he was presenting—the philosophy and religion of the

Upanishads. Unlike the West, where philosophy and religion are completely separate, in India religion and philosophy go hand in hand. As a philosophy, Vedanta gives a rational explanation of the origin and nature of the universe and of the nature of the individual; and as a religion it shows human beings how to attain the goal of life—the realization of God and of their own divine nature.

Vedanta, as taught by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, presents the essence of religion itself. It includes Hinduism—just as it includes other religions—and it includes yoga; but it is something more. According to Swami Vivekananda, 'Every sect of every religion presents only one ideal of its own to mankind, but the eternal Vedantic religion opens to mankind an infinite number of doors for ingress into the inner shrine of divinity, and places before humanity an almost inexhaustible array of ideals, there being in each of them a manifestation of the Eternal One' (*Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 63).

So, if Vedanta is both a religion and a philosophy, what is its religion? And what is its philosophy? What are these 'ideals' that Swamiji speaks of? How do we know which one is right for us? This is where an introduction to Vedanta comes in. And Pravrajika Vrajaprana's *Introduction* performs its task beautifully—especially so for Westerners.

We may think we know what religion is, but do we? 'What do we mean when we say God?' Vrajaprana asks. Then again, most religions have a lot of baggage—cultural and dogmatic—attached to them. As Vrajaprana points out, 'What is generally considered "religion" is a mixture of essentials and nonessentials.' Vedanta, however, tries to get to the heart of religion itself. It shows us what the essence of religion is, thus making it universal and capable of being assimilated in any culture.

But having a vague conception of God is not enough. We also have to know who *we* are. Vedanta says we are in essence divine. 'But if our real nature is divine, why then are we so appallingly unaware of it?' asks the author. 'The answer to this question lies in the concept of *maya*, or ignorance.' Explaining *maya* clearly, and in a nutshell, is not easy to do. But Vrajaprana does it, and does it so easily that somehow this concept does not seem strange at all.

Many people in the West now believe in the idea of reincarnation, in spite of its non-acceptance by Christian Churches. And many people also know the word 'karma', but they usually have

only a vague understanding of what it means. Is the law of karma fatalism? 'Not in the slightest,' says the author. 'Vedanta is both personally empowering and deeply compassionate.' Can we neglect those who are suffering on the plea that they are reaping the fruits of their own karma? Again the author says no. 'Oneness is the law of the universe, and that truth is the real root of all acts of love and compassion,' she explains.

Now, if our goal is God, or Self-knowledge, how do we attain it? Vedanta prescribes different paths to suit different types of people. These are the four yogas taught by Swami Vivekananda. But why did he not just teach meditation? Is not everything realized through meditation? As Vrajaprana says, 'If we can imagine a lake that is whipped by waves, fouled by pollution, muddied by tourists and made turbulent by speedboats, we will get a fair assessment of the mind's usual state.' What happens when we meditate? 'A thousand different thoughts fly at us,' she says, 'all leading the mind outward. The fly buzzing around suddenly becomes very important. So does the thought of dinner.... The argument we had yesterday becomes even more vivid and powerful; so does the perfect retort that we've cleverly composed during our "meditation." ... Were it not so dismaying, it would be funny.'

So how do we make this lake of the mind calm and pure? The practise of meditation and the other spiritual disciplines prescribed in the four yogas is only part of the process. We must also make sure we translate what we profess into action—through moral and ethical disciplines. Most of these disciplines are obvious—truthfulness, non-violence, non-stealing, and so forth. But we have to understand that they are to be practised in our thought and speech, as well as in our actions. But what is wrong with accepting gifts? And why celibacy or chastity? Americans don't hesitate to question things (out of a sincere desire to understand), so the answers better be good. And Vrajaprana's are.

Other topics dealt with beautifully in this book include the avatar, the harmony of religions, and Vedanta's great theme song—the oneness of existence. The book concludes with short biographies of Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, and Vivekananda, explaining their relevance and importance to the Vedanta movement today.

So what about 'simple'? Is the book a simple introduction? And does 'simple' mean it is watered down or superficial? Simple it is, yes. But watered down or superficial it is not. To explain something simply is not easy. It requires talent. And it also requires a thorough understanding of the subject. Moreover—and this is its biggest plus—this book makes for very enjoyable reading. Though meant for ordinary spiritual seekers in the

West who know almost nothing about Indian philosophy and religion, it is also the ideal reference for those who want the basics of Vedanta in a nutshell.

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PĀRVATĪDARPAṆA: By Harsha V. Dehejia. Published by Motilal Banarsidass 41-IA Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, New Delhi 100007. 1997. Pp. xi+120. Rs.95.

The present work by Dr Harsha V. Dehejia approaches the basic tenets of Kāśmīr Śaivism through the myth of Śiva and Pārvatī's marriage, representing the union of the blissful, formless Spirit with the dynamic energy that permeates the universe. This is a myth full of symbolic significance and is reflected everywhere in the Hindu tradition in various forms—literary as well as iconographical. Dr Dehejia observes in the Prologue, 'India reveals itself to me through images rather than through ideology, through gestures rather than through words and through myth rather than history.' In keeping with this belief Dr Dehejia has chosen the iconographical image of Ardhanārīśvara, Śiva and Pārvatī united in a single figure—half male and half female—to illustrate the inner significance of the myth that is found in the basic tenets of Kāśmīr Śaivism. The author of the book appears to be a devotee, interested in *saguṇa brahman*, whom he can love and know through music, movement, image, and through the 'creations of the potter and the pot.'

Dr Dehejia thinks of a dichotomy between ideology and image (Prologue, p.1), but this may not be acceptable to many. They may think that ideology is represented in concrete image so that ordinary people may understand it, and enjoy its beauty and grandeur.

Dr Karan Singh, in his erudite Foreword, has spoken of 'the famous Madurai sculpture of Viṣṇu giving Pārvatī's hand in marriage to Śiva,' and also 'the shrine of Śuddha Mahādeva near Jammu, where, according to legend, the marriage actually took place.' Photographs of these in the book would have increased its beauty.

The book contains seven chapters: (a) Prologue, (b) The Spirit of the Āgamas, (c) Mystic images in the Indian tradition, (d) The Śiva-Pārvatī myth, (e) The Darpaṇa of Pārvatī, (f) Viśrānti, and (g) Epilogue. The Endnotes, Bibliography and Glossary at the end of the book have added to its wealth.

In the second chapter, the author refers to ma-

major streams of the Nigamas and the Āgamas in Indian philosophical tradition, but does not say anything about the mingling of these two streams in some philosophical works of great thinkers like Sri Aurobindo.

In the third chapter, Dr Dehejia observes: 'The ability to enjoy and celebrate a myth is the very essence of Indianness' (p. 17). Will it be acceptable as a general statement? Many Indians like to reject myths as unacceptable because they think these are illogical. Will they cease to be Indians only on this count?

In the fourth chapter the Śiva-Pārvatī myth or legend has been discussed. This is poetic and will appeal to devotees.

The fifth chapter begins with a differentiation between Realism and Idealism, according to the Indian as well as the Western traditions (p. 41). The author takes Śaṅkara's Advaita as idealistic as opposed to the realistic. This point requires elaboration. Śaṅkara is an idealist as a spiritualist, but he is not so in the context of epistemology; to him knowledge is not possible without an independent object, and according to idealism like the Vijñānavāda, an object apart from knowledge is impossible. Śaṅkara himself has criticized such a form of idealism in his *Brahma Sūtra-bhāṣya* (2.2.28-31). The correct position of Śaṅkara is that he is an idealist or spiritualist ontologically, but epistemologically he is a realist.

The fifth chapter is a fusion of mythology and mysticism. The author observes: 'The mirror in the hand of Pārvatī is not an object of feminine vanity, as some make it out to be, rather, the mirror is held that Śiva can see his own face in it.' This is not for intellectual grasp but for imaginative apprehension and appreciation.

In the sixth chapter the ultimate attainment through the process of self-awareness is discussed. This is a stage of stillness or *viśrānti*, of fulfilment and enjoyment. We are to feel it; and perhaps, we cannot express it in language.

The book under review is a new approach (iconographical) to Kāśmīr Śaivism, and this is perhaps meant for devotees and believers. The image on the cover represents the contents of the book to a person of imagination and appreciation.

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By Advaita, we generally mean Advaita Vedānta. But when we fathom the depths of Indian philosophy, we find different types of Advaita. Prof Chandradhar Sharma has discussed three forms of Advaita in the book under review: (a) Buddhism, (b) Vedānta, and (c) Kāśmīr Śaivism. The book is interesting, illuminating and also controversial. Controversy, of course, is no bane in philosophy; it is something very natural.

Apart from the Preface and Introduction, the book contains three parts. These three parts contain the following ideas: Part One, the philosophy of the Buddha, ie, Śūnyavāda or the Mādhyamika school, and Vijñānavāda or the Yogācāra school; Part Two, Pre-Śaṅkara Vedānta, Śaṅkara Vedānta, and Post-Śaṅkara Vedānta; and Part Three, an exposition of Kāśmīr Śaivism and a critical estimate of it.

The author holds: 'Buddha is a non-dualist whose central teaching is spiritual absolutism taken from the Upanishads, which is not incompatible with epistemic realism. Buddha like the Upanishads insists on the direct realization of the Absolute which he calls "Nirvāṇa" and prescribes an elaborate spiritual discipline for its realization' (p. 16). This is highly controversial. Generally, we know that the Buddha was not interested in metaphysics; his interest was in ethics, to reach a state free from misery. The path (*mārga*) recommended by the Buddha consists of eight steps or rules and is, therefore, called the Noble Eightfold Path. This gives in a nutshell the essentials of Buddha ethics. A scholar can refute such a generally accepted view, but he will have to do so on sufficiently strong grounds. The author himself observes: 'The Tripitaka canon of the Theravāda was compiled by the Third Buddhist Council (*saṅgīti*) under the presidency of Tissa (Tissa), summoned by King Ashoka at Pataliputra near about 249 BC. ... This Pali canon is the oldest record of Buddha's teachings available to us' (p. 16).

Buddha belonged to the 6th century BCE and his teachings were compiled in 249 BCE. The huge gap between the Buddha's date and the date of compilation of his teachings may be considered sufficient time for addition to and alteration in his original words. In this context, the view of a reputed Buddhist scholar, Dr B.M. Barua, may be referred to. He submits: 'The Pali canon, on the evidence of which...[early Buddhism] is based, is not a book which took its shape or came into existence all at once. It is only a corpus of texts that grew up by stages, and no less by different permutations and combinations, additions and alterations, and expositions and deliberations. And yet the whole of it is allowed by tradition as *Buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha' (*The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. 1, p. 442). A story told by Olden-

THE ADVAITA TRADITION IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: By Dr Chandradhar Sharma. Published by Motilal Banarsidass. 1996. Pp. xii+283. Rs.295.

berg (*Buddha*, p. 344) is very interesting and important: 'After the death of Buddha, Purāṇa, an old disciple, came to Rajagriha and was invited to accept a canon which the other disciples gathering together had meanwhile fixed, but he declined to do so, saying that he preferred to hold fast to what he had learnt from the lips of the exalted Master himself.' The inevitable conclusion from this is that 'we do not know what Buddha really taught.' Under the circumstances the Absolutism of the Buddha which Prof. Sharma propagates in his book under review is debatable. His expression 'The Bliss of Nirvāṇa' (p. 29) may not be acceptable to many. Is nirvana a stage of bliss? Nāgasena, a later Buddhist, in answer to the question, says yes. But what about the Buddha himself? Many scholars think it is the negation of sufferings and nothing else to the Buddha.

To Prof. Sharma, both Śūnyavāda and Vi-jñānavāda propagate Advaita. These two theories have differences, he argues, but they agree on the view that Reality is One, he concludes. Our great teacher MM Jogendranath Tarka-Vedanta Tirtha, the late professor of Indian philosophy, post-graduate research department, Sanskrit College, Calcutta, used to refute such a conclusion. We cannot elaborate this point for want of space. Prof. Sharma's interpretation of *nairātmyavāda*, in general outline, will be acceptable to great Buddhist scholars like Bidhubhushan Bhattacharya and Satkari Mookerjee of the University of Calcutta.

Prof. Sharma has discussed Advaita Vedanta under three heads: (a) Pre-Śaṅkara Vedanta, (b) Śaṅkara Vedanta, and (c) Post-Śaṅkara Vedanta within a hundred pages. This has been a stupendous task and many points have gone unelaborated. Of course, this part of the book is highly readable.

The last part of the book has been devoted to Kāśmīr Śaivism, with a critical estimate. For the students of the topic and general readers, the discussion is good and useful.

The author has made a comparative and critical study of some schools of Advaita in Indian philosophy on the basis of primary sources. Prof. Sharma is well known to Indian students of philosophy for his textbooks. This book also will help the students and general readers. The printing, paper and get-up are excellent.

Dr Nirod Baran Chakraborty

As the author says in his Preface, 'Writing a book on traditional Indian ethics on which books are aplenty is by no means a novel enterprise.' But he has given a new interpretation in this book. The book has been divided into eleven chapters. Beginning with the Indian concept of morality (Chapter 1), the author ranges over the sources of moral ideas and beliefs, the basics of moral evaluation, the Indian moral system, and the development of these beliefs. He then goes over to the systems of Indian ethics and philosophy, discusses the Buddhist and Jaina approaches (Chapters 8 and 9) and concludes with the 'justification of morality in Indian thought.' The author has a style of expression which makes difficult ideas simple. In the fifth chapter, for example, Mr. Tiwari explains in an uncomplicated style the rather difficult concept of *avidyā* or ignorance, and the question of freedom versus determinism. Next, he ranges rather widely over the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Smritis, the *Mahābhārata* (which includes the *Bhagavadgītā*), etc. Readers will find it easier to have a comparative idea of the subject with such a thorough treatment of various approaches in one chapter.

In discussing karma (p. 125), the author's approach is unconventional. He accepts that the law of karma is 'an extension of the law of causation.' Even so, he goes on to examine further and refers to concepts like 'conservation of energy', then 'moral values', and finally the 'law of retribution'. Quoting Dr. Radhakrishnan, the author says that there is complete justice and not anarchy in the moral world. In some of the concluding chapters the author goes a little beyond the scope of the book to explain concepts like *niskāma karma*, *puruṣārtha*, and 'freedom and responsibility'. The basic principle that 'man has got freedom to choose and to act' has been well propounded. There is also an interesting discussion (pp. 68-9) on the Gandhian approach to ethics, as it fits into the framework of Indian thought.

The Bibliography is good and short. It is a very good book, attractively printed. It will be no doubt useful to both the laity and the learned. It sets an example in clarity of exposition of complex ideas. The effort of Kedar Nath Tiwari is indeed admirable. A valuable addition indeed to the literature on the subject.

Dr D. K. Oza

Former Vice-Chancellor

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CLASSICAL INDIAN ETHICAL THOUGHT:
By Kedar Nath Tiwari. Published by Motilal Banarsidass. 1998. Pp. xii+172.
Rs.195.

News and Reports

Ramakrishna Math and Mission Relief and Rehabilitation Work

West Bengal Flood Relief

Unusually heavy downpour for several days during the last week of September caused floods in many parts of West Bengal. In Calcutta itself some of the streets were under knee-deep water. Ramakrishna Mission immediately started relief operations in ten districts of West Bengal and also in Calcutta through its branch centres.

Under the direct supervision of the Headquarters milk and biscuits were served to 2000 flood-stricken children and mothers for 12 days, and 1472 saris, 1538 dhotis, 1510 *lungis*, 1070 blankets and large quantities of assorted clothes were distributed among 1070 families covering 9 villages around Navadwip and Prachin Mayapur in Nadia district. In addition, medical relief work was also organized for 12 days, during which period 1803 patients were treated. Though the relief work was discontinued on 21 September, it had to be resumed on the 29th in view of fresh floods devastating the area. While dry food materials were being distributed among the flood victims, attempts were being made to serve *klichudi* as early as possible. Detailed reports are awaited.

A dozen branch centres—in Malda, Sargachhi, Ichhapur, Antpur, Belur (Saradapith), Baghbazar, Calcutta (Advaita Ashrama), Barasat, Asansol, Midnapore, Contai and Jalpaiguri—reached the marooned population through their camps and distributed food, clothing, medicines and other aid materials to thousands of people for several days.

Tamil Nadu Drought Relief

Ramakrishna Math, Ootacamund, started primary relief work among the drought-affected people of Kirnakorai village in Nilgiris district near the Kerala border, and was taking steps to distribute rice at the time this report was received.

Gujarat Distress Relief

Ramakrishna Ashrama, Rajkot, distributed 1000 kilos of maize among 100 poor tribal families of Nimach village of Dahod district.

Andhra Pradesh Cyclone Rehabilitation

All the eight pre-stressed concrete girders have been cast for the Vivekananda Bridge under construction at Pallavaripalem village in East Go-

davari district, and the work on the approach roads on both sides of the bridge is continuing. Besides, foundation work has been started for the construction of a suitable pedestal for the installation of a 9½-ft bronze statue of Swami Vivekananda at the entrance of the bridge on the mainland side.

Gujarat Cyclone Rehabilitation

Under the aegis of Ramakrishna Mission, Porbandar, the ground-breaking ceremony of the proposed colony (with 20 houses, a community hall, a prayer hall, a children's park, etc) at Vadala village was conducted on 18 September. This was followed by a public meeting in which Sri Babubhai Bokhiria, state fisheries minister, was present as the chief guest. To date, excavation for eight units has been completed and masonry work for two houses has come up to plinth level.

West Bengal Flood Rehabilitation

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur, is continuing its rehabilitation programme for the flood-affected people of eight villages in Murshidabad district. Out of the 676 houses to be constructed, 412 houses have already been completed and 21 have been erected up to plinth level. Also, construction of low-cost latrines and installation of handpumps are continuing.

Foreign News

Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, USA, celebrated the centenary of Swami Vivekananda's arrival at Ridgely on 28 August. Amidst the sound of numerous conch-shells and the showers of flower petals, a large photograph of Swamiji was brought onto the retreat grounds in a horse carriage. The carriage, along with a procession of swamis, religious leaders from different traditions, devotees and children, passed through the different important places in the Retreat where short ceremonies of welcome to Swamiji were performed. The procession finally reached the Manor House, where Swamiji's photo was taken out of the carriage and seated in a chair to the shouts and cheers of 'Jai Swamiji'. Representatives of different religions offered prayers, songs and messages of welcome. Spiritual music and dance by eminent artistes and several other programmes were also organized on the occasion. Around 600 people attended the celebration. A retreat for about 100 people was also conducted on the following day.



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

(JANUARY – DECEMBER 1999)

Managing Editor
Editor

Swami Mumukshananda
Swami Sunirmalananda

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